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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of the present study is to describe the events which took place in the southeast European theater of war during May 1941. Joint operations by the German Twelfth Army and Fourth Air Fleet had succeeded in driving the Anglo-Greek forces from the mainland. Expulsion of the British from the islands in the Aegean Sea was absolutely necessary, if the vitally important sea route Constanza - Corinth - Italy was to be secured for Germany. The island of Crete was the chief base for the British air and naval forces in the eastern Mediterranean.

For Hitler, who had a horror of all operations which involved crossing a body of water⁴, the action in the eastern Mediterranean was merely a minor skirmish in a secondary theater of war. Germany was in the midst of preparations for the campaign in Russia, slated to begin in the summer of 1941, and the battle going on in the Balkan theater of operations seemed fairly insignificant.

The marked lack of enthusiasm of the Italian fleet for Mussolini's plan to recapture the "mare nostrum", the ignominious failure of the Italian armies during the Grecian adventure, and the collapse of the Italian troops in North Africa all combined to convince the German Wehrmacht High Command that there was little hope of firm support from her

4 - Generaloberst Student, article in "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), special issue dated May 1953, page 2.

Italian allies in case Germany should decide to launch an attack in the Aegean.

The future enemy for continent-minded Hitler was Soviet Russia; it was with great reluctance that he listened to the plans to break England's power in the Mediterranean by means of a daringly-conceived operation by the German Luftwaffe-occupation of the island of Crete by an air landing action. The next step from Crete was to be a landing on Cyprus, and the ultimate objective the capture of the Suez Canal⁵. Rommel's panzer armies were to cross the desert to Alexandria. "Air expeditions"⁶ were planned from there to Syria and Iraq.

The most intransigent obstacle to Germany's ambitious plans was the strength of the Royal Navy. Accordingly, the battle of decision would be the one between the German Luftwaffe and the British naval forces.

Shortly before the beginning of the Russian campaign, then, the events covered in our study started to take shape at these border points between southeast Europe and the Near East, on the one hand, and Europe and Africa, on the other. The Luftwaffe, undaunted by land or water, was to play the leading role; supporting roles had been assigned to elements of the German Army and Navy.

The purpose of our study is to present a chronological summary of the events in the eastern Mediterranean during May 1941. This is an eminently worthwhile undertaking, for "....as far as sheer daring is concerned, the air attack on Crete is the most outstanding operation of the entire war. Nothing even remotely like it had been tried before

5 - Alkmar von Hove, Achtung Fallschirmjaeger! (Watch Out - Paratroopers), Druffelverlag, Leoni am Starnbergersee, 1954, page 112.

6 - Taken from the diary of General von Waldau, page 45, where the following

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6 - (cont) appears: "Juncok is to take two squadrons to Baghdad....".
Major von Blomberg was killed in action in Baghdad on 12 May 1941.

or was ever tried subsequently. It was a revolution in the field of tactics....!"⁷

This new and revolutionary method of waging war - new in concept and new as far as the equipment was concerned - was to succeed in drawing a good deal of attention to the minor skirmish which took place in a secondary theater of operations. The fact that the occupation of Crete was a Pyrrhic victory⁸ makes it imperative that we delve into all the sources of error which made it such a costly operation that no further large-scale air landings were attempted during the entire course of the war.

The scope of the available reference materials is somewhat disappointing; although there is a wealth of material (documents, books, etc.) dealing with Crete, it does not furnish detailed coverage of all the questions which must be dealt with in an exhaustive treatment of the subject. In particular, there is a lack of authentic information concerning the coordination of the operations of the Luftwaffe bomber units with those of the air landing forces. As a result, it is extremely difficult to determine the reasons for the error in timing which led to a number of serious setbacks.

In addition, we have very little documentary material on the role played by the Army, a role which was of decisive significance for the ultimate victory. We are faced with a gap in the reporting⁹. As far as the Navy's role is concerned,

7 - Generalmajor (Major General) J.F. Fuller, Der Zweite Weltkrieg (The Second World War), Humboldt-Verlag, Vienna and Stuttgart, 1950, page 128.

8 - Winston Churchill, The Second World War (based on excerpts prepared by the Historical Division, Karlsruhe).

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9 - According to a personal letter to the author, one of the collaborators on the present study, A. Buchner, is working on a book dealing with the operations of the German mountain infantry units in Crete (to be based on authentic sources).

the documentary material available is commensurate with the scope of its participation in Operation MERKUR¹⁰.

The most important single source is the report issued by the air landing corps¹¹ just a few days after the fighting on Crete came to an end. There is every reason to accept it as the definitive chronicle of events. It presents a convincing and colorful summary of the impressions of the participants, of the operational measures taken, and of events themselves. Obviously, it was prepared too soon after the air landing operation to include all the pertinent details, with their complex and far-reaching ramifications, for a great many of these details did not come to light until later, after interrogation of wounded personnel, etc.

In contrast to the on-the-spot report of the XI Air Corps, the official "Report on Crete", prepared by the Fourth Air Fleet as higher headquarters, did not appear until 28 November 1941¹². It is obvious from the report that Crete had been overshadowed by the events taking place in the Soviet theater of operations; in many instances the Cretan operations are inaccurately reported and improperly evaluated¹³.

These two detailed basic sources are supplemented by a plethora of individual reports which serve to throw additional light on the events occurring on the various combat sectors or to illuminate the specialized roles played by air transport,

10 - Operation MERKUR (Mercury) is the code designation for the occupation of Crete.

11 - Combat report of the XI Air Corps, dated 11 June 1941, Part II, page 2, Karlsruhe Document Collection. (Hereafter referred to as "XI Air Corps, Report on Crete").

12 - Report of the Operations Branch, Fourth Air Fleet, File No. 1839/41, Classified, date 28 November 1941, Karlsruhe Document Collection. (Hereafter referred to as "Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete").

13 - These are Generaloberst Student's exact words as stated to the author.

supply, logistics, etc. The reports which were prepared after the war, and thus based on the "memory" of their authors, not only contain a goodly number of factual errors but are usually highly subjective in tone.

The death of the commanding officer of the 7th Air Division¹⁴ and the incapacitation of the commander of the storm regiment (Sturmregiment)¹⁵ are no doubt responsible for the lack of any first-hand observations concerning the effectiveness of leadership in the Luftwaffe units. The war diary maintained by the 7th Air Division has been lost.

Of the many works dealing with the battle of Crete, one deserves our particular attention - a representation of the Cretan campaign as seen from the point of view of the enemy, and substantiated by captured documents in American (GMDS) and British collections. "The author is a New Zealander who took part himself in the fighting on Crete. His book is very well written, well documented, and based on exact personal knowledge of his subject; all this, combined with great vividness of style, makes it a masterpiece of military history...."¹⁶ This work has no parallel, not even in Germany, although it must be admitted that the author's knowledge of some aspects of air landing operations is not so perfect as it might be. This lack, however, is not serious enough to detract in any way from the excellence of this source.

14 - Generalleutnant Suessmann, Commanding Officer, 7th Air Division, was killed when his aircraft crashed during the approach flight to Crete.

15 - Generalmajor Meindl, Commander, Storm Regiment, was seriously wounded during the first day of fighting on Crete.

16 - D.M. Davin, Crete, in the Official History of New Zealand, Oxford University Press, London, 1953.

17 - Based on a letter to the author from the military historian Major W. Mark, Ph.D., in Aarau, Switzerland.

The memoirs of the commander of the air landing corps¹⁸ are landmarks in the description of the struggle to occupy the island of Crete. They are of particular value because they are permeated with highly objective criticism of the decisions taken and measures ordered by their author.

All the rest of the sources are more or less indebted to these three (all of them easily accessible), and thus have relatively little to offer in the way of original observation.

We may summarize the question of source material by pointing out that the sources available are not entirely satisfactory. A good deal of research and evaluation are still necessary if we are to have a complete and detailed picture of the air landing action in Crete and if we are to understand the reasons why the air landing forces were not pressed into service again throughout the entire war.

There are certain difficulties to be overcome in the preparation of a complete account of the operations in Crete. For one thing, due to the fact that there was very little time for systematic preparation, improvised measures were the rule of the day. As a result, there are very few directives or orders of the usual type available.

Furthermore, a complete account of Crete must include mention of all the various Luftwaffe, Army, and Navy units which participated in the operation and must make some attempt to coordinate the roles played by them.

The extremely heavy losses suffered during the fighting on Crete have left relatively few survivors who could be interviewed as to their personal experiences. Moreover, after the fifteen years which have elapsed since the battle of Crete, it is only natural that their recollection of events should be somewhat uncertain.

18 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs appearing in the magazine "Weltbild" in the June, July, and August numbers of 1951.

Any discrepancies or questions can be cleared up with absolute accuracy only in those cases in which the informants have some sort of diary or personal notes at their disposal¹⁹.

The air landing forces had passed their initial test with flying colors during 1940. Even the most skeptical and conservative of Germany's top military leaders seemed to be fully convinced of their worth. Nevertheless, there were still influential circles in the Wehrmacht which felt called upon to advise against any increase in the strength of the new force and to warn against its employment on a large scale. In reality, of course, their attitude was motivated chiefly by their reluctance to accept the incontrovertible fact of the tremendous success enjoyed by the air landing corps²⁰. Misleading and untrue statements from this source have not been taken into consideration in preparing the present study.

The hectic development and growth of the air landing force in the period during which Germany's military activity was subject to strictest secrecy makes it extremely difficult to prepare an accurate record of the newly activated units and their chain of command. We must not forget that in 1939 Germany's only paratrooper company displayed its ability before Hitler during the harvest festival ceremonies on the Bueckeberg; a scant five years later, Germany had an entire air landing corps at her disposal for the occupation of Crete.

19 - In this connection the reader is referred to the diaries of Generals Conrad, von Waldau, Seibt, etc., and the commentaries pertaining thereto.

20 - Based on information given to the author by Generaloberst Student.

CHAPTER I

Development and Organization of the Parachute and Air Landing

Forces after their Commitment in the West (May 1940).

The unexpected success of the air landing corps during the capture of Fortress Holland and of Fort Eben Emael in 1940 gave rise to the plan of developing the parachute and air landing arm further, increasing it considerably in size. Goering was especially eager to see the paratrooper units strengthened; after all, they had done a good deal to enhance the reputation of the Luftwaffe.

The number of volunteers for the parachute forces (officers, non-commissioned officers, and enlisted personnel) during the summer of 1940 surpassed all expectations. As a result, physical and mental aptitude requirements could be made exceptionally high and adhered to strictly²¹. It must be conceded that the morale and the standard of training were excellent, with one possible reservation - the youthful paratroopers were so eager and so willing to risk their lives that they really ought to have had an older and more cautious corps of mid-echelon leaders to act as a brake and to keep them from indiscriminate foolhardiness.

The air landing corps grew so rapidly that the technological developments revealed as necessary by the campaign in Norway and Holland in 1940 were unable to catch up. As a result, the paratrooper units lacked lightweight rapid fire weapons, light artillery with

21 - Based on the author's personal experience. Of every hundred non-commissioned officers and enlisted personnel volunteering for duty with the parachute forces, only about fifty were able to pass the physical examination and the probationary period.

automatic draft gear (which could be either dropped from the aircraft or landed), and - above all - powerful yet easily-handled antitank guns. There was always the alternative of dropping 37mm antitank weapons with a so-called quintuple parachute (five freight parachutes bound together), and it was even possible to secure a heavy motorcycle with side-car to the exterior of a Ju-52 and to drop it (with parachutes) over the area of operations. However, the number of guns and vehicles which could be dropped was very limited and their over-all effectiveness often jeopardized by the damage they sustained upon landing.

In addition, by 1941 the German aircraft industry had not yet succeeded in meeting the need for a faster transport aircraft with greater load capacity and a bullet-proof fuel tank and for a more robustly constructed freight glider with greater stability under adverse weather conditions, a larger loading area, and a diving brake.

The signal equipment for handling ground to air communications (between the supporting bomber forces and the ground troops and between the transport aircraft and the landed paratrooper forces) had not been developed any further, in spite of the fact that it was the inadequacy of the equipment which led to the catastrophe at Rotterdam on 14 May 1940.

In short, "Crete came too soon!"²²

During the convalescence of General Student, who had been seriously wounded during the landing in Holland, command of the 7th Air Division was assumed by General Putzier. General Putzier had led the special duty air units assigned to support the air landing operation in Holland in 1940.

22 - These are the exact words used by General Student during a lecture held at Hildesheim on 29 November 1953.

Lt. Colonel Trettner (GSC), Operations Officer of the 7th Air Division, was in charge of the preliminary staff work needed for the planning of possible air landing actions in such areas as Gibraltar, Malta, the Cyclades, etc. Operations SEELOEWE²³, in particular, was planned down to the last detail.

Eventually all of these projects were given up or postponed indefinitely.

It was not until January 1941²⁴ that General Student was able to resume command of his division. In the meantime the latter had expanded into the XI Air Corps (parachute and air landing).

The following table shows the organization of the XI Air Corps (as of 15 April 1941²⁵:

Organization of the XI Air Corps as of 15 March 1941²⁶

Headquarters, XI Air Corps (General Student, Tempelhof)

reconnaissance squadron

air transport squadron

air transport headquarters staff

41st Luftwaffe Communications Battalion

operations staff, paratrooper antiaircraft machine gun forces

supply headquarters staff

paratrooper medical battalion

23 - Operations SEELOEWE (Sealion) was the code designation for the landing in England.

24 - Alkmar von Hove, op.cit., page 104

25 - Based on an official table of organization prepared by the Operations Branch, office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, dated 15 April 1941. Personnel assignments can be reconstructed from the combat reports. See also the organizational table of the Air Landing Corps, Headquarters XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Section B, File No. 2025/41, Classified, dated 30 April 1941; as well as Appendix 1 to the present study.

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26 - Based on an official table of unit distribution prepared by the
Operations Branch, office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe.

Headquarters, 7th Air Division

one air transport squadron

headquarters staff, 1st Parachute Regiment

Group I, 1st Parachute Regiment

Group II, 1st Parachute Regiment

Group III, 1st Parachute Regiment

1st Artillery Company

1st Antitank Company

Headquarters, 2d Parachute Regiment

Group I, 2d Parachute Regiment

Group II, 2d Parachute Regiment

Group III, 2d Parachute Regiment

2d Artillery Company

2d Antitank Company

Headquarters, 3d Parachute Regiment

Group I, 3d Parachute Regiment

Group II, 3d Parachute Regiment

Group III, 3d Parachute Regiment

3d Artillery Company

3d Antitank Company

Parachute Machine Gun Battalion

Parachute Engineer Battalion

Parachute Antitank Battalion

Parachute Artillery Battalion

Parachute Signal Company

Headquarters, 22d Infantry Division*

16th Infantry Regiment*

65th Infantry Regiment*

22d Artillery Regiment*

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22d Reconnaissance Battalion*

22d Antitank Battalion*

22d Antiaircraft Battalion (motorized)*

Divisional troops*

* (Translator's Note) Here the following notation appears: "DLM bzw. Ob.d.H. unterstellt" (subordinate to DLM or Army High Command). I have been unable to find the abbreviation DLM listed anywhere. It might conceivably stand for Deutsches Luftfahrtministerium, although the usual title, of course, was not Deutsches but Reichsluftfahrtministerium.

Air Commander (XI) (Fliegerfuehrer XI)

Headquarters Staff

I Group, 1st Air Landing Wing

II Group, 1st Air Landing Wing

III Group, 1st Air Landing Wing

Headquarters, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

I Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

II Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

III Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing (at that time subordinate to
the C(?) Air Corps)

IV Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing (at that time subordinate to the
IV Air Corps).

Headquarters, 2d Special Duty Bomber Wing

101st Bomber Group

102d Bomber Group

104th Bomber Group

105th Bomber Group

Headquarters, 3d Special Duty Bomber Wing

9th Special Duty Bomber Group (at that time subordinate to the
X Air Corps)

106th Special Duty Bomber Group

I Group, 172d Bomber Wing

40th Special Duty Bomber Group

50th Special Duty Bomber Group

60th Special Duty Bomber Group

Headquarters, Storm Regiment (Sturmregiment), with Signal Platoon.

I Group, Storm Regiment (Signal Platoon, 3 Squadrons*, 1 Heavy Company)

II Group, Storm Regiment (Signal Platoon, 3 Squadrons*, 1 Heavy Company)

III Group, Storm Regiment (Signal Platoon, 3 Squadrons*, 1 Heavy Company)

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IV Group, Storm Regiment (4 Companies, making a total of 13 artillery companies, 15 machine gun companies, 14 anti-tank companies, 16 engineer companies).

* Translator's Note: The German text has the abbreviation "St.", which could stand for Stab (staff) as well as Staffel (squadron). (?)

CHAPTER II

The Decision to Attack; A Brief Description of the Island.

Section 1 - The Order for the Occupation of Crete.

The Balkan campaign in April 1941 had left the Axis Powers in possession of the Greek mainland. If southeastern Europe was to be permanently secured, however, the expulsion of the British from the mainland was not enough. It was imperative that the Aegean islands be cleared of the enemy as well. For this reason, General Student, Commanding General of the XI Air Corps (the air landing corps), suggested to Goering on 20 April 1941 that Germany should occupy the island of Crete in a paratrooper and air landing operation²⁷.

Hitler allowed himself to be persuaded of the need for such a step and ordered the attack on Crete with the proviso that it should begin on 15 May 1941.

During a conference in Wehrmacht High Command Headquarters with General-feldmarschall Keitel and General Jodl, the point was raised whether it might not be even more urgent to have the air landing forces take the island of Malta first²⁸. Hitler, however, decided on Crete, which could serve as a springboard to the Suez Canal via Cyprus. "Malta can be taken care of later," he is supposed to have said, "... the occupation of Crete is a good way to conclude the Balkan campaign".²⁹

Hitler's decision was transmitted to the XI Air Corps on 23 April 1941. At this time, the

27 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 3.

28 - Dokumente der Zeitgeschichte (Documents of History), the memoirs of General Student in the magazine "Weltbild", Volume 6, Issue 14, dated 15 July 1951, page 18.

29 - See Footnote 28, above.

majority of the paratrooper units were still stationed at their home airfields or were assigned to troop training areas.

Thus there was very little time available to assemble the air landing units and to prepare them for the operation against Crete. Together with other, similarly improvised air landing operations of World War II, Crete goes to prove that heavy losses and serious setbacks are the inevitable corollary to any air landing action which is launched without adequate planning.

The 22d (Air Landing) Infantry Division, under Generalleutnant Graf Sponeck, which had been tried and tested during the operations in Holland during May 1940, had been sent off to Rumania by the Army High Command to occupy the oilfields for Germany, although in reality it was subordinate to the XI Air Corps³⁰. Despite repeated requests to the Wehrmacht High Command and even to Hitler himself, General Student was unable to get it back for the contemplated occupation of Crete. The Army High Command was not in a position to furnish the transport space needed to move the Division to Greece. The Twelfth Army in Greece was ordered to release certain units to strengthen the air landing forces and to support the latter in every way possible.

The Fourth Air Fleet, under the command of Generaloberst Loehr, was entrusted with the accomplishment of Operation MERKUR; the VIII and XI Air Corps were assigned to it for this purpose.

Admiral Schuster (Admiral, Southeast) was placed in charge of the naval operations.

30 - See the table of organization drawn up by the office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, Intelligence Branch, under date of 15 April 1941; see also Chapter I.

After the assembly of the XI Air Corps and its transport into the operational area, the most urgent task was the collection of material on the topography of the island of Crete.

Section 2 - A Brief Description of the Island.³¹

1. Size, Situation, and History³²

With an area of 3,235 square miles, Crete is the largest island in Greece. It ranks after Sicily, Sardinia, Cyprus, and Corsica as the fifth largest island in the Mediterranean. Running from east to west, Crete is approximately 162 miles long; its average width is 18 1/2 miles. The narrowest point on the island, the Isthmus of Ierapetra, is only 7 miles wide; the widest point, 35 miles. The island has approximately 400,000 inhabitants, most of whom earn their living through agriculture.

Crete forms the southern boundary of the Aegean Sea with its countless islands. There are no other islands between Crete and the coast of Africa³³. It is precisely Crete's situation which makes it so very important as a base for the eastern Mediterranean. The distance separating Crete and Libya (North Africa) is less than that between Sicily and Tripoli. Moreover, Crete offers a vantage point from which to control ocean traffic through the Suez Canal and to Egypt.

31 - Sources consulted: the report prepared by the office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, Operations Staff, Intelligence Branch, File No. 12 480/41, Classified, dated 25 April 1941, and the military-geographic description of Greece prepared by the Army General Staff, Cartography and Topography Branch, Berlin, 1941.

32 - The widely differing orthography apparent in the geographic and other names on Crete is no doubt due to the utilization of different maps. The Greek, English, Italian, Latin, and German versions often vary inexplicably - such as Iraklion, Megalokastro, and Candia for one and the same city! The present study will use the versions preferred in the main sources used (reports of the Fourth Air Fleet and XI Air Corps).

33 - See the following map, page 16.

Significant distances:

Crete (western tip) - Sicily	497 miles
Crete (western tip) - Athens	186 miles
Crete (western tip) - Derna	186 miles
Crete (eastern tip) - Rhodes	100 miles
Crete (eastern tip) - Cyprus	342 miles
Crete - Alexandria	335 miles

Even in prehistoric times, from the third to the first millennia B.C., Crete flourished as a link between the Near East and Africa and Europe. The island has countless ruins, brought to light by the excavations carried out by Schliemann and Evans (1899), which bear witness to a glorious past. The sailors from Crete carried the island's culture as far afield as Egypt, Troy (Near East), and Spain.

Economically, Crete is an almost independent member of the Greek state, into which it was officially incorporated in 1913.

2. Population and Government.

Crete is divided into four provinces, Chania, Rethymnon, Iraklion, and Lassithi (from west to east). The seat of government is located in Chania; the largest and most important city is Iraklion.

Once the Turks had been driven out in 1923, the population of Crete was made up of Greeks only, united by their common Greek-Orthodox religion. They are generally considered to be intelligent, temperamental, astute in business affairs, freedom-loving, and courageous - but at the same time easily excitable and difficult to handle. The tradition of vendetta is still alive in Crete today!

The settlements in Crete are scattered irregularly about the island. The majority of the villages are

clustered in the few valleys and plains available, while the mountainous portions of the island are completely unsettled. There are, however, a number of "summer settlements" up on the mountain ridges, where the villagers pasture their cattle during the summer months. There are a few sections along the coast which are uninhabited, for the unyielding mountains, without roads or water, make life impossible.

Apart from the coastal mountains just mentioned, Crete has an adequate water supply from its wells and springs. The water must be boiled, however.

The island has a total of 1,264 villages. Their box-like houses of hollow brick are roomy and usually have flat roofs. Although electric lights are to be found only in the cities, nearly every village has a telephone.

3. Topography, Soil, and Harbors.

Crete is primarily an island of mountains³⁴. Only 185 square miles, or 3% of the total area, are plains. In the northern part of the island, the lofty mountain ranges give way to a narrow strip of foothill land. There are four distinct mountain ranges, covered with snow until mid-May, which divide the island.

In the west, the Levka Ori (white mountains) range extends in a chain 50 miles long, its highest peak 8990 feet above sea level. Made of limestone, the range is steeply precipitous, inaccessible, and totally barren of vegetation. There are two passes which cross it at an altitude of about 1,640 feet, one in the west and one in the east³⁵.

34 - See the pictures on the following page.

35 - See Appendix 2.

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PHOTOGRAPH

Two pictures of Crete taken from the air.

Both show clearly the barren, inhospitable
mountain landscape with the foothills of
the north at its base.

The second range, Ida, is equally barren and uninviting, rising to a height of 8,200 feet. The third, Diktai or the Lassithi Mountains, rise to a height of 6,560 feet around a thickly settled high-altitude plateau. The lowest road across the island, leading over the pass to the harbor of Ierapetra on the southern coast, is located at the eastern edge of the Diktair range.

The eastern part of the island is covered by the fourth mountain range, almost entirely uninhabited and completely treeless. Its highest peaks attaining a height of 4,920 feet, it is known as the Sitia "Peninsula".

Grapes, olives, tobacco, almonds, carob fruit, and grain thrive in the few fruitful coastal plains and in the foothill areas.

PHOTOGRAPH

In contrast to the southern coastline of the island, the northern coast is very irregular and dotted with bays. Suda Bay (see the photograph, above), Crete's most important harbor, is the only one which offers complete protection against the frequent stormwinds from the north. The Akrotiri Peninsula,

which lies directly north of Suda Bay (it may be seen in the background of the photograph on the preceding page) falls off steeply into the sea and is a thoroughly effective barrier to any force seeking entry into the harbor. Suda Bay offers excellent cover for sea-going vessels and is ideal as a harbor for seaplanes. The plateau on Akrotiri (1,640 feet high) provides a perfect vantage point from which to defend the harbor and to keep it under constant observation. Even in prehistoric times, the Peninsula was strongly fortified to defend Suda Bay.

The Gulf of Mirabella, another protected bay, is located on the northeast coast of Crete. This bay, too, is suitable for use by seaplanes. The harbors serving the three large cities on the northern coast (Chania, Rethymnon, and Iraklion) are artificial ports, their basins protected by breakwaters and piers and their channels only deep enough for vessels of 3000 tons or less.

There are no harbors whatsoever on the eastern and western coasts of Crete. On the southern coast, the mountains plunge directly into the sea and the violent surf makes almost the entire coast unapproachable. The southern coast has only one, very inadequate port, in the southeast near Ierapetra. In addition there are two tiny bays, Palaeochora and Skafia, neither of which is really equipped as a harbor. They are utilized occasionally by sailboats and fishing cutters with a maximum draught of five feet.

4. Highways and Cities.

Crete's main artery is the highway which runs along the northern coast from Kastelli (in the west) to Sitia (in the east). Its importance becomes all the greater when we consider that Crete, large as it is, has no

railway³⁶. Narrow and of varying surface composition, this road is the only means of communication among the main population centers of the island. For a part of its way, the road can be seen from the sea. There are a few secondary roads leading from the main highway into the interior of the island, but only four of these actually go through to the southern coast.

PHOTOGRAPH

The east-west highway along the northern coast, here the stretch connecting the airfield at Malemes with Chania.

All the rest of the so-called roads are really no more than narrow pathways, suitable only for pedestrians and donkeys.

Only the main highway and the four north-south roads mentioned above can be utilized by motorized troops.

³⁶ - See Appendix 2

The largest and most important city in Crete is Iraklion (also known as Megalokastro or Candia), which has approximately 40,000 inhabitants. It has very little industry - an olive oil refinery, a few raisin processing plants, and one or two wine presses. The inhabitants earn their living through the sale of agricultural products, shipping, and fishing.

PHOTOGRAPH

The capital city, Chania. In the background in the right-hand corner of the photograph is the airfield at Malemes (marked with an x)

Chania has a population of 26,000 and is the official capital of the island as well as its seat of government. All of the consulates are located in Chania. The city lives by trade and commerce; there is no industry (note the absence of factory chimneys in the above photograph).

Rethymnon, with a population of approximately 10,000, lies on a point and has little significance except as a center of local administration with a favorable position as far as island traffic is concerned.

The smaller cities, such as Kastelli, Neapolis, Nikolaos, and Sitia, are connected with one another by the coastal highway. The largest of these has no more than 3,000 inhabitants. Most of them are simply market towns for the surrounding villages. Ierapetra, with 3,000 inhabitants, is the only settlement on the southern coast which can be considered a "city". All of these settlements are characterized by the presence of ancient fortresses (usually in ruins) dating from Venetian or Turkish times.

5. Airfields.

The German intelligence agencies were able to gather the following data on Crete's three airfields - which were little better than emergency fields as far as their equipment was concerned:

Iraklion: There was an airfield located some two and one-half miles east of the city. It boasted two runways (one of them still under construction) 4,600 feet long and 150 feet wide. The field seemed to be adequate for bombers.

Rethymnon: About five miles east of the city there was an improvised landing strip some 3,300 feet long.

Malemes: At Malemes, which is located approximately ten and one-half miles west of Chania, there was an airfield 3,600 by 1,650 feet. It did have a finished runway, but no other equipment whatsoever. It was presumed to be adequate for the employment of both fighters and bombers.

All of these airfields had been established and built up by the Greeks and the British at the beginning of the war. All three lay close to the main highway running along the northern coast of the island. There were no airfields whatsoever in the interior or on the southern coast.

We have already mentioned the feasibility of landing seaplanes in the bays along the northern coast.

6. A Military-Geographic Summary of Crete.

Crete is completely inaccessible to a landing from the sea or from the air from the south, west, and east. It offers no suitable terrain for an air landing in the interior; the pathless, arid, and barren mountain regions are far too wild.

Any operation carried on in the eastern portion of the island must accept the risks involved in being very far away from the mainland base of operations (Athens). A large-scale joint landing by sea and air forces could be carried out only in the northwest of the island, where it would have the coastal highway at its disposal. The only well-equipped harbor capable of handling such an operation was Suda Bay.

After careful consideration of the conditions obtaining, German strategists established the various possible lines of main effort developing after an invasion within this relatively small area (small, in relation to the size of the island) - around the capital city of Chania, west of Chania towards the airfield at Malemes, and east of Chania towards Suda Bay.

7. The Personal Impressions of the Author.

The author participated personally in the battle for Crete. As commander of an overstrengthened parachute company, he was released over Malemes on the first day in the first wave of paratroopers. As an eye-witness, then, he may be permitted here to

supplement the "official" version of events with a few subjective observations.

The soldier in the midst of operations is totally unconscious of the undeniable beauty of the island's landscape. All he sees are dust and dirt, a terrain which offers few landmarks by which he can orient himself, but whose rocky composition and wealth of thin-leaved olive trees make the ricocheting of enemy bullets particularly unpleasant³⁷.

We found the clothing of the natives rather strange - a homespun shawl some twenty to thirty feet long and as wide as a towel, a sheepskin jacket and sheepskin cap in the form of a fez. The Cretan houses proved to be not entirely free of fleas and bedbugs and thus fairly uninviting as billets. But even camping outside was not much better; sand fleas and other bugs saw to it that we slept very little.

Because of the unaccustomed heat, a march of even one or two hours was a tremendous strain. We were continually thirsty and tired and there was never anything around to drink.

In addition, the German, Italian, and Greek maps proved to be so terribly inaccurate that it was almost impossible to find one's way, even along the main highway. The distances seemed eternal.

To put it succinctly, there wasn't a single soldier who really felt at home on Crete - quite a different situation from that observed in France, Italy, and even Norway ...

37 - See the photographs on the following page.

Our fairly lengthy disquisition on the military-geographical characteristics of Crete is, in the author's opinion, imperative if the reader is to understand the over-all organization of the mission and the decisions made by those entrusted with its accomplishment, and to appreciate properly the battle fought by the air landing force.

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PHOTOGRAPHS

Two typical views of the landing area on the northwestern coastal plain of the island of Crete. Note the olive trees in the foreground and the steadily rising foothills and mountain ranges in the background. (The landing area shown is the one near Malemes).

CHAPTER III

The Enemy Situation

Section 1 - The Permanent Occupation Force and the Units Recalled from Greece.

Immediately after the conclusion of operations on the Greek mainland, German planners began an intensive campaign to obtain data on the enemy situation on Crete. This task was entrusted to the Fourth Air Fleet, with its subordinate headquarters staffs (the VIII and XI Air Corps) and all the aerial reconnaissance and other intelligence facilities available³⁸. Specific missions were assigned as follows:

1. Aerial reconnaissance

Two reconnaissance squadrons from the VIII Air Corps were to keep ship movements around Crete under constant surveillance and to determine the strength of the enemy forces stationed at the harbors and the strength and position of enemy air forces.

The reconnaissance squadron from the XI Air Corps was assigned to investigate the island's airfields and to determine the location of antiaircraft batteries, artillery positions, field fortifications, and troop assembly areas.

2. Intelligence service (the counter-espionage service directed by Admiral Canaris)

Admiral Canaris' organization sent a number of confidential agents to Crete with orders to find out whatever they could about enemy strength, any military preparations being made by the British, and the morale and attitudes of the population.

³⁸ - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, Part II, Section 1, page 8.

Especially trained interrogators from the Twelfth Army were to interview prisoners with a view to determining the military situation of the enemy on Crete.

The isolated position of the island and its distance from Athens (186 miles), which would serve as the base of operations for the contemplated German landing, made it all the more difficult to obtain accurate information concerning the enemy and his situation.

Results of Intelligence Activity

1. Enemy Strength

On the basis of the investigations made, the strength of the enemy force was estimated at one division made up of two infantry and one artillery regiments³⁹. No data could be obtained regarding the geographic distribution of these elements. In addition, it was assumed that there were remnants of the Anglo-Greek forces from the mainland on the island; their exact strength was unknown.

Despite careful observations of Crete-bound ocean traffic, it was impossible to tell definitely whether reinforcements were being landed, superfluous troops being evacuated, or merely supplies being delivered. Direct surveillance of convoy movements around Crete was impracticable since the ships came and went by night. This was especially true of traffic in and out of Suda Bay.

Strange as it may seem, there was reason to suppose that troops were being evacuated from Crete. "From early May on, the island was watched continuously by aerial reconnaissance forces. They were unable to discover any information pertaining to the strength and distribution of enemy forces. We studied the aerial photographs

39 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 9.

in vain in search of the "tramped down" areas invariably indicative of established defensive positions. Returning reconnaissance pilots reported again and again that the island appeared to be completely dead. The only sign of life were the antiaircraft defenses, consisting of antiaircraft artillery and fighter aircraft, and even these were extremely weak..."⁴⁰

Intelligence data indicated that there were from twenty-five to forty aircraft (mostly fighters, a few bombers) at each of the island's two main airfields, Malemes and Iraklion. The airfield located near Rethymnon was determined to be of extremely limited suitability.

Light and heavy antiaircraft artillery was identified in the vicinity of the airfields, at Suda Bay, and near the capital city of Chania. It seemed to be concentrated around the area of Chania.

Suda Bay, the most important harbor on Crete, was occupied by enemy naval forces (both warships and transport ships), in varying strength. There were hardly any ships stationed in the other harbors or along the coast near possible landing areas.

Fortifications and bunkers were identified only in the immediate vicinity of the airfields. Confidential agents reported that the natural caves in the limestone mountains of the island were being equipped as supply caches⁴¹.

As far as the attitude of the population was concerned, it was assumed that they would be more than willing to conclude a peace based on the same favorable conditions as had been granted to the forces on the mainland. Germany's top-level military leaders were convinced that there were certain influential circles in Crete which, at the very least, could be counted upon to remain neutral, and

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- 40 - Generaloberst Student, "Kreta, Schicksalsschlacht unserer Fallschirmtruppen" (Crete, The Turning Point for Germany's Parachute Forces), in a special issue of "Der Deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), dated May 1953.
- 41 - For a picture of one of these natural caves, see the photograph on the following page.
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which, under certain circumstances, might even show themselves sympathetic to the Axis Powers. There was even serious speculation as to whether the British might not voluntarily leave the island in view of this attitude on the part of a large portion of its population⁴².

PHOTOGRAPH

This photograph shows the entrance to a cave on the island of Crete. In the foreground, left to right, are General Ringel, Commanding Officer of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, General der Flieger Student, and General Schlemm, Chief of Staff of the XI Air Corps.

42 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 9.

Intelligence reports regarding the situation of the enemy on Crete were not only very superficial but also highly contradictory. In one report⁴³ it is stated that "the Greeks are no longer capable of fighting..." Their fear of the German dive-bombers and twin-engine fighter aircraft was supposedly too great. "In the event of a German landing, a similar demoralization among the British forces can be expected - though perhaps to a some what more limited extent..."

In another order it is pointed out that the troops must be made aware that the majority of the enemy forces were British, a great many of them having already seen action in the Pelopon^{us} and having escaped from there to Crete⁴⁴.

In Paragraph 2 (Enemy Situation) of the directive issued for Operation MERKUR by the XI Air Corps⁴⁵, it is mentioned that the information currently available was inadequate, but that it would be supplemented regularly as additional data were received. The promised supplementary information was never forthcoming....

Instead Admiral Canaris, Director of Germany's intelligence services, paid a personal visit to Athens at the beginning of May. On this occasion, he commented as follows⁴⁶: "The majority of the British forces have already been evacuated; the VIP's of the Cretan population are awaiting us with open arms so that they can go ahead and throw out the rest if they won't go peaceably!" German military leaders believed in all seriousness that the island of Crete would be willing to capitulate on the same terms as had been offered Greece, and that the British would then withdraw from the island.

43 - Attack Orders of the II Battalion, Storm Regiment, dated 16 May 1941 (from the author's personal collection).

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- 44 - Generalmajor Meindl, "Gruppe West" (Group West), Operational Directive for Operation MERKUR, No. 120=41, Classified, dated 17 May 1941 (see Appendix 3).
 - 45 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, No. 47/41, dated 12 May 1941, Operational Orders for Operation MERKUR, Classified, for commanders only (see Appendix 4).
 - 46 - Generaloberst Student, "Der Deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), May 1953.
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This evaluation of the enemy situation on Crete turned out to have nothing whatsoever to do with the conditions actually encountered.

The main reason for the failure of German intelligence activity lay in the masterful way in which the British managed to camouflage their preparations for the defense of the island. Having become thoroughly familiar with the way in which the German parachute forces were employed (during the operations in Norway, Holland, and Corinth), the British had reconnoitered the island to locate all those points at which a parachute landing might conceivably be expected. The majority of these potential landing areas (usually lower-lying valleys) were surrounded by hills from which they could be kept under observation, and the enemy had established and permanently manned strong positions on these vantage points. In addition snipers had been strategically distributed throughout the surrounding wooded areas, so that the landing spots could be kept under fire from all sides.

And all of these preparations went undetected by German intelligence. They were not apparent in the enlargements made of aerial photographs; nor were they noticed by low-flying reconnaissance aircraft.

The antiaircraft and artillery positions which showed up on the aerial photographs turned out, in part anyway, to be dummy positions - manned with wooden guns! The real positions, carefully camouflaged, lay elsewhere⁴⁷ and most of them remained undetected.

There was no way of telling how long before the start of operations in the southeast theater the British had begun the task of fortifying the island of Crete⁴⁸.

In any event, it was clear that the British had every intention of defending the island and of defending it successfully⁴⁹.

47 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 11.

48 - See page , paragraph , of the present study.

49 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 11, paragraph g.

2. Strengths and Weaknesses of the Defending Force (factors determined by the position of the island and the state of its harbors and airfields and by the availability and effectiveness of fortifications).

The British were aware of the fact that an air landing action on Crete was in the wind. And so far as they knew, the possibility of supporting operations by the Italian Navy could not be discounted. In any case, they assumed that a coup carried out by German paratrooper forces would naturally be supported by other troops brought to the island by sea.

Accordingly, their defenses were built up to meet a combined attack. The island's topography limited an attack by parachute and air landing forces to those three areas along the northern coast where the three airfields were located. Around these three airfields, according to the reports of German agents, the British had set up a system of defensive positions, admirably organized and equipped and cleverly camouflaged among the olive trees.

In addition, strong defensive positions had also been established at all those points along the coast which might conceivably be vulnerable to a landing from the sea⁵⁰.

For the most part, however, these reports were brushed aside as fantastic. The theory that the British had placed their confidence primarily in the effectiveness of antiaircraft and other heavy artillery concentrated at the airfields and at the points at which an air landing might be expected was tacitly accepted as the correct one.

50 - The British were firmly convinced that the Italian Navy would participate in any German action against Crete.

One of the main strengths of the defending force, then, lay in the concentration of its power at the few specific points made most likely by the island's military-geographic situation. The defenders reckoned with the possibility that the contemplated invasion would be strongly localized, in which case it could be easily repulsed by massed counter-attacks with armored support.

The British did their best to stir up Cretan feeling against the Germans and even armed large sectors of the population. In this way they gained considerable reinforcements (particularly valuable because of their exact knowledge of the countryside) for their defensive forces. The British appeal to the vendetta instincts of the native population was to take serious toll of the German invaders.

Although the British had relatively little heavy artillery to set against the lightly-armed parachute and air landing forces, they did possess the advantage of strong antiaircraft artillery and - above all - the easy mobility of most of their artillery. The fact that the majority of the British units were motorized placed the defenders in a favorable position to begin with. German intelligence agents were firmly convinced that any invading force would encounter light and medium armored vehicles on Crete.

Sons of a sea-faring nation, the British defenders naturally placed a great deal of hope in effective support by the Royal Navy, whose aircraft carriers, heavy cruisers, and submarines could be summoned without delay from Alexandria, Malta, and Cyprus. Since the British were so clearly in command of the seas, it seemed most unlikely that an enemy attack might come from the Aegean. Most of Crete was easily visible from the sea, so that British vessels could hold great stretches under fire at a time and

thus destroy an invading force entirely with naval artillery.

The signal communications system was extremely well organized, so that the British would have no difficulty in shifting their defensive forces about to meet the brunt of an enemy attack (which, in any case, would necessarily be limited to a narrow strip extending some 125 miles along the northern coast of the island).

And this, as a matter of fact, brings us to one of the weaknesses in the British defense system - namely the fairly large distances from one position to the next and the difficulty of establishing contact between them except by the main coastal road. It is true that the British had a highly adequate aircraft reporting service, which - as reported by aircraft from the VIII Air Corps - was directed from a series of patrol boats in the Aegean⁵¹. Even so, the lack of adequate reconnaissance, fighter, and bomber aircraft was bound to act as a weakening factor in the defense of Crete, in view of the island's distance from the large Allied bases in Africa and the Near East. In the last analysis, if an enemy invader should succeed in blocking the one and only highway along the northern coast, there would be no way to move the defending forces about to meet the various points of emphasis occurring during the attack.

As a result, the geographic location of the island's three airfields along the main thoroughfare was actually more of a weakness than a strength, as far as the defenders were concerned. If there had been a central airfield located somewhere in the middle of the island, it would have provided a far more effective base from which to combat landings both from the sea and from the air. Unfortunately, however, Crete possessed no other airfields.

Apart from Suda Bay, the harbors of Crete were entirely without significance. They were far too ill-equipped to permit the rapid unloading of transport vessels, either those bringing reinforcements

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51 - Hqs XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Enemy Data Sheet (Feindnachrichtenblatt) No. 2, page 15, III, 1, b.

for the defenders or those landing troops and supplies to support an invasion. The British would find it necessary to tie up strong defense forces at the harbors only if the Italian Navy should take part in the invasion.

British intelligence was soon able to assure the defenders of Crete that there was very little likelihood of intervention of any kind on the part of Italian naval forces. Due to the high degree of effectiveness of the British intelligence service, the defenders of Crete were furnished with exact information concerning the contemplated air landing operation (including the latest operational directives⁵²), so that there could no longer be any hope of taking them by surprise. Even the possibility of a tactical surprise in terms of the kind, strength, or time of the operation was ruled out entirely⁵³.

The defenders did not have sufficient armaments and ammunition. This was particularly true of the units which had fled to Crete from the Greek mainland; they were haphazardly equipped, poorly armed, and only rarely motorized. This disadvantage was compensated to some degree at least by the fact that the topography of the island was bound to create a great deal of difficulty for any force landing by parachute. The rocky, mountainous terrain alone would assure that a certain percentage of the parachutists were injured by the landing itself. The olive groves, the irrigation ditches, and the low thorny shrubs such as century plants also served as obstacles to an air landing force and thus as reinforcements for the island's defense force. On the eve of the invasion, then, a defense force determined to hold out to the last (under the command of General Freyberg, appointed by General Wavell on 28 April 1941 to the post of Commander, Crete⁵⁴) faced an equally determined attacking force under the leadership of combat-seasoned officers.

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- 52 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 9 ff.
53 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 12.
54 - D. M. Davin, Crete, page 39.
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All in all, the strengths and weaknesses of the British defending force just about balanced each other. For the attackers, it was imperative that the Luftwaffe - i.e. the VIII Air Corps - should prove enough of a match for the Royal Navy to keep it from intervening in the battle of Crete. This in turn, depended in great part on the weather.

3. Weather Conditions⁵⁵.

Even today, with the help of radar and other navigation aids, it is absolutely impossible to guide a large parachute and air landing force through a large-scale operation under unfavorable weather conditions. Not only the location of predetermined landing areas, but also the preparation for the landing by pinpoint bombing of specific targets and its continual support by bomber and supply transport aircraft are dependent upon a fairly long period of good weather. The task assigned to the meteorologists of the air landing force, a definitive evaluation of weather conditions, was thus an extremely important and responsible one.

In general, as far as flight weather over Crete is concerned, conditions are typical of the Mediterranean climate⁵⁶. During the winter, which extends from November through February, there are frequent storms, with heavy clouds and a great deal of rain. During the summer, from June through August, the weather is cloudless, dry, hot, and almost without atmospheric disturbance of any kind. The lowest temperature in winter is 39° F; the highest in summer, 96.8° F.

55 - See the report prepared by the office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, Operations Staff, Intelligence Branch, File No. 12480/41, Classified, Section IV, C, 2, dated 25 April 1941.

56 - This is substantiated by the experience of the author in Crete.

In an air landing operation carried out during the month of May, the aircraft would be exposed to the danger of icing only at altitudes of 3,300 feet and above.

The winds from the north often result in the formation of air pockets, especially along the rocky northern coast of the island. This, in turn, leads to the formation of haze and resultant poor visibility. The cloud cover and cloud altitude in the various parts of Crete are almost entirely dependent upon wind direction, due to the mountainous character of the island. During the summer most of the winds blow from out of the north and northeast.

Weather conditions on the ground are exceedingly uncertain because of the frequent cyclones. As a result, a parachute force must be prepared to sustain a certain number of injuries during the landing itself. Wind velocity on the northern coast of the island is between ten and fifteen feet per second and even higher during the day, when ocean winds are blowing.

Because of the mountain ridges (over 6,500 feet high) dividing the island, the landing areas on the northern coast are plagued with treacherous down winds even during the good weather period in summer. There is very little fog during the summer months; however, it is often a feature of the winter storms.

The intense sunshine and withering heat of Crete's subtropical climate was bound to make inroads in the striking power of the air landing forces.

Even so, provided there were no unforeseen changes in the long-range weather forecast for May 1941⁵⁷, the weather conditions could be judged not unfavorable for an air landing action Crete.

⁵⁷ - See Chapter VIII, Section 1, of the present study.

CHAPTER IV

The German Forces

Section 1 - XI Air Corps (Parachute and Air Landing Forces).

As has already been mentioned, it proved impossible to secure the assignment of the 22d Infantry Division for the operation in Crete. A subsequent request for the detachment of at least certain elements from it to form the nucleus of a well-trained landing force was also disapproved. This was the "first serious disappointment"⁵⁸ suffered by the air landing corps. The second, even more significant one followed immediately - General Student continues, " ... My request to have the VIII Air Corps made directly subordinate to me was unfortunately disapproved".⁵⁹

General Student's purpose in making the above request was to achieve uniform and centralized operational command of the flying units and the air landing forces they were to transport⁶⁰. The VIII Air Corps was unwilling to accept such a chain of command and won its point by declaring that the staff of the XI Air Corps simply did not have sufficient personnel to enable it to handle both corps⁶¹.

As a compromise, the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, appointed the Fourth Air Fleet (under the command of Generaloberst Loehr) as superior headquarters and gave it the command of both the VIII and the XI Air Corps. Inasmuch as the naval forces under the command of the Admiral, Southeast, were also attached to the Fourth Air Fleet, it could be stated that Operation MERKUR represented "the first occasion on which a higher-level Luftwaffe agency

58 - Generaloberst Student, in a special issue of "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper) dated May 1953, page 2, column 1; also in a letter dated 15 March 1955 to Prof. R. Suchenwirth.

59 - See Footnote 58, above.

60 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, Section B, File No. 1839/41, Classified, dated 2 October 1941, Commanders' Conference, page 4, Figure 5.

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61 - Based on verbal information given to the author by General Meister, former Chief of Staff, VIII Air Corps, during a conversation in Hannover on 18 November 1955.

was in charge of a major operation involving all three Wehrmacht branches"⁶².

There was, to be sure, one disadvantage - the Fourth Air Fleet was "rather out of things"⁶³, and thus was too far away for effective intervention.

The 5th Mountain Infantry Division, already stationed in Attica and the Peloponnesus, was assigned to the XI Air Corps. Originally these forces were a part of the Twelfth Army, under the command of Generalfeldmarschall List, and had played an important role in the breakthrough of the Metaxas Line⁶⁴ and thus in the capture of Greece.

Counting the ground forces of the XI Air Corps, the 7th Air Division, and the Storm Regiment, but excluding the assigned heavy weapons companies and specialized units, the total strength of the striking force amounted to no more than six regiments. "Hitler never had the right forces available at the right time"⁶⁵. The ground force was far too weak to accomplish the task demanded of it, namely the capture of a heavily defended island whose territory was as large as half the present province of Hesse! In addition, the 5th Mountain Infantry Division had absolutely

62 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 54.

63 - Based on information given the author during a conversation with General Meister and substantiated by General Trettner.

64 - A line of fortifications along the northern border of Greece.

65 - Generalfeldmarschall von Manstein, report on the fighting in the Mediterranean theater of operations, page 102.

no practical experience in air landing operations, while the 22d Infantry Division (a part of the 7th Air Division and thus of the XI Air Corps since 1938) not only had the advantage of joint training with the air transport units but had also gained a great deal of valuable experience during the operations in Holland.

The ground forces of the XI Air Corps could be divided into three categories, depending upon their method of transport and the way in which they were to be employed. They were the following:

1. Those elements which were to be brought to the island by freight glider as the first attack wave - the 1st Battalion of the Storm Regiment under the command of Major Koch. In May 1940, elements of this battalion had helped to capture the Belgian fort Eben Emael and the bridges over the Albert Canal as a part of Germany's "miracle weapon", the glider-transported air landing forces. In short, they were the elite of the air landing corps. Cool-headed and immune to panic, these experienced soldiers were to be landed by the silent freight gliders directly at the enemy positions, their mission being to eliminate enemy antiaircraft and other artillery prior to the arrival of the parachute troops.

On 17 May 1941, Major Koch had at his disposal fifty-three "combat" freight gliders and ten "transport" freight gliders⁶⁶. The combat gliders had a capacity of ten men (including the pilot) and all their equipment. The transport gliders were to bring the heavier signal communications equipment, items such as 200-volt transmitters, which could not be dropped by parachute, and the staff of the 7th Air Division to Crete.

The extremely light construction characteristic of the freight gliders (a framework of plywood and light-weight metal covered with tautly-stretched canvas) proved to be no match for the weather conditions and the inadequate maintenance facilities which were

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66 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, File No. 5642/41,
Classified, dated 15 May 1941, "Air Transport Orders for Crete"; see
Appendix 6.

inherent in all operations in Greece. The fifty-three transport gliders mentioned above were the remainder of an original force of seventy-nine assigned to Attica.

PHOTOGRAPH

A freight glider ready to take off for Crete. the 130 foot-long towing cable has been fastened to the glider's nose; its landing skid has been wrapped with barbed wire to cut the landing run as short as possible.

PHOTOGRAPH

A freight glider after the landing on Crete. The loading aperture is clearly visible under the wing in the foreground of the photograph.

2. Those elements which were to descend upon the island by parachute - the 7th Air Division with its three paratrooper regiments, the Storm Regiment with three battalions, and the various independent battalions and companies attached to the XI Air Corps or to the 7th Air Division.

We have considerable information available, in the form of official memoranda⁶⁷, regarding the equipment, armament, and method of employment of the paratrooper forces. There are two points which deserve our special attention.

PHOTOGRAPH

a. The officers, as leaders of their respective units, were given white parachutes for the leap over Crete. In this way, the troops would have a fairly good idea - even while still in the air - of the general direction in which to hunt for their unit commanders. (The photograph above shows a white parachute, second from the left, during the landing on Crete.). The parachutes used by the troops were of a darker color designed to blend into the landscape.

b. Nearly every memorandum contained warnings against the fire of

67 - Group West, Generalmajor Meindl, Operations Branch, No. 102/41; see Appendix 3.

enemy ship-based artillery⁶⁸.

The leadership of the 7th Air Division and of the paratrooper regiments was entrusted to combat-seasoned, reliable officers. The non-commissioned officers and the majority of the paratroopers, however, were to see action for the first time in Crete - clearly somewhat of a disadvantage in view of the over-all situation.

With a very few exceptions⁶⁹, morale, standard of training, armament, and equipment could be regarded as entirely satisfactory. On the other hand, however, the youthful paratroopers lacked the kind of practical experience which even the best of training courses cannot impart, but which the rest of the infantry troops had obtained by the long marches through Poland, France, and the Balkans - without having participated in a single large-scale engagement.

And this gives us an inkling of the rather odd position of the paratrooper. He was not a member of the army, yet he was expected to fight on the ground; he wore a Luftwaffe uniform, yet was unable to fly an aircraft; his training was often of the sketchiest kind. The highly exaggerated esteem for the paratrooper among the civilian population served to bolster his self-confidence, otherwise based on nothing more tangible than the paratrooper patch on his shoulder. His colleagues in the infantry forces looked with envy at the many privileges accorded him, from extra jump pay and special rations to the comforts of motorized transport. His aura of heroism was enhanced by the fact that most paratrooper missions were "top secret"; decorations were awarded with a lavish hand in the beginning.

Every effort was made to obviate the potential dangers inherent in this situation by assuring calm, cautious, and experienced leadership. The contemplated occupation of Crete, an operation ordered at the last minute

⁶⁸ - General Meindl, for example, had landed at Narvik by parachute and was

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68 - (cont) well acquainted with the dangers of enemy artillery fire, both from the sea and from the land.

69 - The most important exception was clothing!

with no opportunity for the detailed preparations which had led to sure success in Holland, was hardly conducive to improvement of the attitude held by the "younger" paratrooper. Systematically trained for individual combat, the majority of the younger paratroopers were inclined to place too much faith in the newness and in the surprise value of the air landing method. As a result, they felt that they could carry the day without having to resort to the tried and tested principles of a planned attack.

The stubborn self-confidence of the younger paratrooper forces often represented a barrier between them and their leaders; command of a paratrooper unit was anything but an easy assignment.

The foregoing should not be interpreted as an attempt to belittle the paratrooper forces in any way. On the contrary, our appraisal would do them little service if we did not point out the bad as well as the good by mentioning objectively recognized deficiencies.

c. By May 1941 the paratroopers had achieved a relatively high standard of perfection in landing techniques and state of technical equipment, insofar as tactical and other deficiencies permitted. The air landing forces, on the other hand, consisting of infantry troops which were to be transported by air to their area of operation, had enjoyed superb training as far as tactical ground fighting was concerned, but were completely innocent of experience as regarded the actual air transport action!

PHOTOGRAPH

The photograph shows mountain infantry forces landed by air in Crete; the airfield in the picture is the one at Malemes.

In the last analysis, the XI Air Corps could consider itself fortunate that it was assigned mountain infantry units in place of the experienced 22d (Air Landing) Infantry Division, which could not be spared at the moment. The 5th Mountain Infantry Division, under the command of General Ringel, had had a great deal of combat experience in a number of theaters of war⁷⁰. In view of the mountainous terrain of Crete, the Division could be viewed as a welcome deus ex machina for the coming operation. It was clear that the mountain infantry units could do much to support the regular air landing corps.

70 - General Hubert Lanz, Gebirgsjaeger (Mountain Infantry), H. H. Podzun-Verlag, Bad Nauheim, 1954, page 302.

Altogether, then, the XI Air Corps had at its disposal for the air landing operation on the island of Crete the following forces:

freight gliders (storm forces)
 paratroopers
 mountain infantry (as airborne infantry)

The Air Commander (Fliegerfuehrer), XI Air Corps, Generalmajor Gerhard Conrad, had ten Ju-52 special duty bomber units⁷¹ under his command with which to transport the landing force to Crete.

These transport units were organized into special duty bomber wings as is shown below for their participation in Operation MERKUR⁷²:

1. Special Duty Bomber Wing (von Heyking)

60th Special Duty Bomber Group
 101st Special Duty Bomber Group
 102d Special Duty Bomber Group
 106th Special Duty Bomber Group

The wing staff was stationed in Topolia, together with all the groups except the 106th, which was assigned to the airfield at Dadion⁷³.

2. Special Duty Bomber Wing (Buchholz)

40th Special Duty Bomber Group
 105th Special Duty Bomber Group
 1 Group, 1st Air Landing Wing

The Buchholz Wing was stationed at the airfield at Tanagra except for one half of the I Group, 1st Air Landing Wing, which was located at Eleusis. It was the 1st Air Landing Wing

71 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 11, Section 1, b.

72 - The organizational roster given here is taken from a study by Lt. Colonel Horning, Retired, which, in turn, is based upon the war diary kept by Generalmajor Conrad. Hornung's data do not agree entirely with the report of the XI Air Corps. Both sources are available in the Karlsruhe Document Collection.

73 - See the following maps for the distribution of the air units participating in the Crete operation.

which was to tow the freight gliders (DFS-230's) carrying Major Koch's I Battalion, Storm Regiment, to its landing point⁷⁴. For reasons of space, it was necessary to divide the I Group, 1st Air Landing Wing, assigning each half to a different airfield. After completion of its initial mission, the towing of the freight gliders to Crete, the half group from Eleusis was to return to Tanagra and remain there.

3. Special Duty Bomber Wing (Wilke)

I Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

II Group, 1st Special Duty Bomber Wing

172d Special Duty Bomber Group

The staff of the Wilke wing was stationed at the airfield in Megara, while the bomber groups were distributed between Megara and the airfield at Corinth.

During the course of the operations against Yugoslavia and Greece, these air transport units had carried out a large number of actions in behalf of the Fourth Air Fleet and the VIII Air Corps. As a result of unfavorable weather conditions, quite a few aircraft and crews had been put out of action, so that the units had to be returned to home territory for replacement of materiel and personnel losses. Beginning on 1 May 1941 the transport units were distributed among the home area repair depots (Grossenhain, Oshatz, Sorau, Fuerstenwalde, Cottbus, Braunschweig-Waggum, Rangsdorf, Koeslin, etc.); by 14 May, they were back at their assembly points in and around Athens - their aircraft having been restored to full operability in two weeks of day and night labor. In view of the tremendous distances involved (this was 1941!), this feat deserves special praise, not only for the way in which it was performed but also for the way in which it was organized.

74 - The DFS-230 was named after the Deutsche Forschungsstelle fuer Segelflug (German Glider Research Institute) in Darmstadt; this freight glider was model number 230.

As of 14 May 1941, 502 Ju-52's were ready for action⁷⁵, out of an authorized aircraft strength of 539⁷⁶.

Assuming that each Ju-52 was capable of transporting a total of twelve paratroopers and their gear, the maximum number of troops which could be set down over Crete simultaneously was approximately 6,000. At least three waves would be necessary to transport the entire paratrooper force of 16,000 to 18,000 men to Crete⁷⁷, and even a fourth would be required if unforeseen circumstances should put more than a few transport aircraft out of action. With the limited air transport space available, the island could be "sprinkled, but hardly deluged" with paratroopers.....⁷⁸.

In other words, the numerically impressive half a thousand transport aircraft - an armada of the air - were somewhat misleading.

Section 2 - The VIII Air Corps.

As of May 1941, the strength of General der Flieger Freiherr von Richt-hofen's VIII Air Corps, which was assigned the task of providing air support for the landing on Crete, was as follows⁷⁹:

280 bomber aircraft (Ju-88's and Do-17's)

150 dive bomber aircraft (Ju-87's)

180 single-engine and twin-engine fighter aircraft (Me-109's and Me-110's)

40 reconnaissance aircraft⁸⁰.

The VIII Air Corps, its aircraft strength brought up to the total indicated (approximately 650), had already seen action as a ground support corps during the Balkan campaign and was stationed at the "best" airfields in Greece, viz:

75 - The study by Lt. Col. Hornung (based on General Conrad's diary) states that there were only 439 transport aircraft ready for action as of 14 May.

76 - Based on the records of the XI Air Corps.

77 - Generaloberst Student, during the course of a lecture held at Hildesheim.

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- 78 - General Guderian often spoke of these two extremes as being characteristic of the methods employed by bad and good leadership respectively.
- 79 - Based on the diaries of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, as edited by Colonel Deichmann, Retired. The reader is also referred to Winston Churchill, The Second World War, Volume III.
- 80 - There ^{are} ~~is~~ no data available regarding the models of the reconnaissance aircraft; presumably they were Ju-88's or Do-17's.
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the fighters and dive bombers on the Peloponnesus, and the bombers in central Greece (see map).

On 1 May 1941 Major von Heinemann (GSC), Operations Officer of the VIII Air Corps, was ordered to Gatow to help plan the Corps' role in the coming campaign against Soviet Russia⁸¹. And this rounded out the multiple mission of the VIII Air Corps, which was expected to accomplish the following tasks simultaneously:

rebuild its strength after the conclusion of the Balkan campaign;
prepare for the air landing in Crete,
continue sporadic combat missions over the Aegean (a relatively new method of employment - air combat over water), and
prepare itself for an entirely new mission (the Russian campaign) in an entirely new theater of operations.

Section 3 - The Mine-Laying Group.

The II Group, 4th Bomber Wing, was an independent unit under the direct command of the Fourth Air Fleet. Its mission⁸² was to lay a carpet of mines around the Suez Canal and off the shore of Alexandria prior to the beginning of the landing in Crete⁸³.

Section 4 - The Sea Rescue Service.

The carrying out of an air landing on the island of Crete presupposed the air transport of two divisions across the sea! In addition, there was the entire VIII Air Corps, whose effective employment over Crete depended upon its reaching the island from the Greek mainland - a long distance over water. All in all, some 1,200 aircraft⁸⁴ would be participating in Operation MERKUR,

81 - The diaries of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, as edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 4.

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- 82 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Grete, page 12.
- 83 - The II Group was equipped with He-111's. During the period from 1 May through 7 June, it carried out six missions to Alexandria, four to Suez Canal, and two to Iraklion. (Geschichte des K. G. 4 (History of the 4th Bomber Wing), Karlsruhe Document Collection).
- 84 - Winston Churchill, The Second World War, page 279; the same figure is also found in the diaries of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen.
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certainly a large enough number to warrant the establishment of a well-organized sea rescue service.

The Fourth Air Fleet had the following forces at its disposal for the accomplishment of sea rescue missions⁸⁵:

1. Two squadrons from the 126th Naval Reconnaissance Group, based at Nauplia on the eastern coast of the Peloponnesus and equipped with He-60's. Among the missions assigned to the 126th Group was the task of keeping the waters of the Aegean under constant surveillance to spot any instances of distress at sea. The He-60, however, was not large enough to permit it to pick up rescued crews⁸⁶.

2. The 7th Sea Rescue Squadron, whose headquarters at Phaleron had been expanded to Sea Rescue Headquarters (Aegean)⁸⁷. The 7th Squadron was equipped with aircraft better suited to sea rescue operations than the He-60:

5 He-59's and

3 Do-24's.

Obviously, this was a very small force in view of the extensive area to be covered. Accordingly, the Fourth Air Fleet requested additional sea rescue aircraft from the Sea Rescue Headquarters in Sicily⁸⁸ and was assigned three more machines.

In addition, the Sea Rescue Headquarters (Aegean) assembled all the Fw-58's on duty with the fighter units and all the aircraft from the stand-by squadron of Fourth Air Fleet Headquarters and scheduled them for employment to drop inflatable boats during sea rescue operations. Plenty of inflatable rafts had been brought from the home area and were

85 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 43 (J, I, 1).

86 - Taken from a letter written by Lt.Col. Fegler, Retired, Karlsruhe Document Collection.

87 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 43

88 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 43.

stored ready for immediate use at Sea Rescue Headquarters in Phaleron.

Since the German naval force in the Aegean was so small anyway, it was impossible to reserve sufficient ships for sea rescue operations exclusively. Only three small vessels could be made available, and even these were not really adequately equipped.

Section 5 - The Naval Forces under the Command of the Admiral (South east)⁸⁹.

The preparations for Operation MERKUR envisioned two main missions for the participating naval forces:

1. the delivery of sufficient supplies of weapons, explosives, gasoline, foodstuffs, etc. to meet the immediate needs of the landing force, and
2. the preparation of the transport actions involved in the accomplishment of Operation MERKUR.

Most of these supplies had to be transported from the Black Sea through the Dardanelles to Salonica and on to the Piraeus. Coordinating the appearance of German, Rumanian, Bulgarian, and Italian ships in the right place at the right time

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89 - There are authentic documents available concerning the employment of the German Navy in Operation MERKUR, most of them collected by the author during wartime (1944), such as the following:

- a. War Diary of the Admiral (Southeast) for the period 16 May through 31 May 1941 (kept by Admiral Schuster and Kapitaen zur See Heye).
 - b. Navy Group Command (South), Operations Report No. 4358/41, dated 19 July 1941, classified, dealing with naval activity in the Aegean.
 - c. Admiral (Southeast), Report on the Preparation and Accomplishment of Operation MERKUR, File No. 8689, classified.
 - d. Admiral (Southeast), Brief Report to Naval Command Headquarters (Seekriegsleitung), File No. 830/41, classified, dated 23 May 1941.
- Most of the material to follow is based on the last-named source.

was a problem of no mean difficulty⁹⁰. And the entire success of the initial phase of the airlanding depended upon timely delivery of the necessary supplies to their destinations in Crete.

The first supply wave was to consist of sixty-three small motor-driven sailboats, which were to bring materiel reinforcements⁹¹ to the island as soon as suitable landing areas were in friendly hands.

These boats had been rounded up and gotten ready in a hurry, and there had been no time to check on their seaworthiness. The majority of the Greek crews "vanished" and had to be replaced by German naval personnel, who first had to be brought from Germany by air⁹².

Compasses and charts were most inadequate on all these sailboats; moreover, not a single one could be fitted with radio and signal equipment in the short time available.

The sailboat groups destined for Malemes and Iraklion were each given one Italian destroyer as escort. Each destroyer carried one of the German convoy leaders (Commander Devantier and Commander von Lipinski).

90 - See Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 12 ff; the Operations Reports of the XI Air Corps; and Report No. 1, 54 of the Mountain Infantry forces. The figures reported in all of these sources agree; however, only in the War Diary of the Admiral (Southeast) is there a detailed summary of the last-minute drop-outs.

91 - War Diary of the Admiral (Southeast), page 2.

92 - Admiral (Southeast), Brief Report to Naval Command Headquarters, page 1.

While some attempt had been made to equip a number of the sailboats as mine sweepers, patrol boats, speedboats, etc., the result "bore all the characteristics of improvisation."⁹³

Italian naval units, comprising torpedo boats, submarines, speedboats, and mine sweepers, were available in the area under the leadership of the Italian Commander Conte Pecori-Giraldi. Their participation in Operation MERKUR, however, was highly questionable; the ships had a way of developing "engine trouble" whenever they were needed....

In summary, objective appraisal of Germany's forces and those of her allies seems to indicate that they were quite adequate for the mission they faced, a mission which had been planned with care but whose actual execution was bound to be attended by a good deal of improvisation. Opinions regarding the degree of strength required varied considerably. "A single paratrooper regiment is enough for Crete", said the Fourth Air Fleet⁹⁴; "The available forces are wholly inadequate", countered the XI Air Corps⁹⁵.

In any case, there were certain changes in the over-all strength during the period between the assembly of forces and the actual launching of Operation MERKUR. For example, "... 17 May 1941: during the night the British bombed our airfields in Athens once more... five aircraft were destroyed completely and thirty-eight damaged!"⁹⁶

93 - Admiral Schuster's war diary contains the following comment, "...an Italian submarine chaser had no more effective armament than a light machine-gun".

94 - Reported to the author by General Trettner as the opinion of General Korten, Chief of Staff, Fourth Air Fleet.

95 - Generaloberst Student, During the course of a lecture at Hildesheim.

96 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, War Diary, page 13 ff.

By dint of personal visits to Rhodes and Scarpanto⁹⁷, General von Richthofen succeeded in obtaining the promise of Italian assistance. Six Italian speedboats were to be detached to block the Straits of Caso (to the east of Crete) and the Italian torpedo bombers were to provide support from the air. The Italians had a total of twenty-one bombers and reconnaissance aircraft and twenty-four fighter aircraft based on Rhodes and Leros, as well as a number of small naval units; in addition to the six speedboats, the sources mention two destroyers and a number of MAS⁹⁸.

The airfields in Greece which served as bases of operations for the flying units were so unfortunately located as far as the transport network was concerned that the difficulty of keeping them supplied was a very real threat to the maintenance of striking power.

On the whole it can be concluded that the German flying and air landing units were quite capable of carrying out Operation MERKUR with success; it was the poorly organized aerotechnical ground service system which was the source of difficulty⁹⁹.

The air landing forces could only take light-weight special hand weapons with them in the transport aircraft. Inasmuch as the enemy had been forced to leave all his heavy equipment behind during the evacuation of the Greek mainland, the result

97 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, War Diaries as edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 14 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

98 - MAS are "the secret weapons of the Italian Navy", according to Italian Air Force General D. Ludovico, "Die Eroberung Kretas aus der Luft" (The Occupation of Crete from the Air), page 10.

99 - See "Europäische Sicherheit" (European Security), Volume 4, 1951, the article "Operation MERKUR" by Colonel W. Gaul, page 3.

was that the battle of Crete was the only battle during the entire war which was fought by both sides with light-weight hand weapons¹⁰⁰.

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100 - Generaloberst Student, "Kreta, Schicksalsschlacht unserer Fallschirmtruppen" (Crete, the Turning Point for Germany's Parachute Forces), in a special issue of "Der Deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper) dated May 1953, page 3, column 1.

CHAPTER V

Assembly and Preparation of the Air Landing

Units in Central Greece (up to 14 May 1941).

The assembly area allotted to the air landing units assigned to Operation MERKUR was the region around Athens in the middle of the Greek mainland. Not until late April 1941 was this area brought under complete subjugation by the German Twelfth Army, and the attitude of the population was not particularly friendly at the time the assembly action got under way¹⁰¹.

According to the plan, the German attack force was to be fully assembled and prepared by 14 May 1941; Hitler had ordered that the landing was to be launched on 16 May 1941.

The first phase was the assembly of the "Suessmann Detachment" (i.e. those elements of the 7th Air Division which had taken part in the landing near Corinth on 26 April 1941) in the area around Corinth, such assembly having been accomplished by 2 May 1941¹⁰². During the period from 27 April through 3 May, the rest of the 7th Air Division and the troops of the XI Air Corps set out by rail from their assigned stations in the Reich.

These troops, together with their supplies and the freight gliders, required some ninety railway cars¹⁰³. As a result of

101 - Based on the personal impressions gained by the author during the assembly action. The one usable highway was crowded with recently discharged Greek soldiers. They were assumed to be harmless - but were they all??

102 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 3.

103 - Based on a study by Generalmajor K. Seibt dated July 1945, Karlsruhe Document Collection. Generalmajor Seibt served as Quartermaster General, XI Air Corps.

the fighting in Yugoslavia and the consequent destruction of railroad lines, there was only one route which could be utilized for troop and supply transports, and this route led over a single-rail bridge over the Danube. It had a total capacity of only one transport train per day, so that there was no alternative but to separate the cargo as follows:

1. the freight gliders and the supplies were transported by rail to Sofia and Salonica and were unloaded south of the Danube. From these unloading areas, gliders and goods were brought by air to the take-off airfields, whence they were delivered by truck to Athens or by ship to the Piraeus.

Every attempt was made to camouflage these transports (by moving the freight gliders in furniture vans, for example) in order not to jeopardize the secrecy of the planned undertaking.

2. the troop trains were unloaded north of the Danube in the regions of Arad and Craiova in Rumania. The transport from the unloading points to central Greece was accomplished by motor vehicles via Sofia, Salonica, Kozani, and Larissa.

The distances involved, using Braunschweig (as the most centrally located of the paratrooper bases in the Reich) as a basis, were as follows:

Braunschweig - Athens	1,783 miles
Arad - Athens	995 miles
Sofia - Athens	498 miles.

Because of the extremely poor condition of the roads and the need for maximum haste in carrying out the transport action, these distances represented a strain and a burden to the troops being transported as well as

to the drivers of the transport vehicles. Even so, natural obstacles such as the Rhodope Mountains and the hairpin curves of the Rupel Pass and at Thermopylae resulted in very few instances of serious damage to any of the 4,000 vehicles of the XI Air Corps.

The topography of the Greek mainland is not conducive to the establishment of a well-developed transport network. Greece has the smallest railway network of all the Balkan countries, for example - only 1,865 miles in length, as compared with West Germany's 77,050 miles! Highway construction, too, presents almost insurmountable difficulties and is prohibitively expensive. As a result, ocean transport has developed into the most important method of moving passengers and goods.

The German Twelfth Army was responsible for determining the order of transport during the assembly operation¹⁰⁴, for one of its armored divisions was marching back from Attica to Serbia along the same narrow, difficult route at the same time¹⁰⁵.

PHOTOGRAPH

104 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, pages 3 and 4.

105 - In preparation for the coming campaign against Russia.

The route had been badly damaged by the retreating enemy (see the photograph on the preceding page), quite apart from the fact that it was in total disrepair. And an earthquake in Thessalig shortly before the transport action got under way had made the war damage even worse. The city of Larissa had been partly destroyed.

It was due to the inadequacy of the transport facilities that the movement of the 22d (Air Landing) Infantry Division from Rumania to Attica was determined to be unfeasible¹⁰⁶. Instead, the 5th Mountain Infantry Division (already stationed in the Athens area) was assigned to the XI Air Corps and trained for employment as an air landing force.

The air transport units of the XI Air Corps, returning from repair and overhauling sojourns in the Reich, were all back in Greece by 14 May 1941.

Thus, by the evening of 14 May 1941, the XI Air Corps, with the 7th Air Division and with those Army and Luftwaffe elements temporarily assigned to it for Operation MERKUR, was assembled and ready for action in the Athens area¹⁰⁷.

The next step, however, was fraught with considerable - and unforeseen - difficulty. In central Greece there was no Luftwaffe ground organization, no Air District Command (Luftgaukommando), no Airfield Area Command (Flughafenbereich), and no Airfield Group Command (Fliegerhorstkommandatur)¹⁰⁸. There were neither supply facilities nor a signal communications system.

The VIII Air Corps, which had taken part in the campaign in Greece, had secured the "best" airfields for its own use. Ten officers qualified to fill the post of Airfield Group Commander were flown to Greece from Vienna.

106 - See Chapter III, Section 1, of the present study.

107 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 6.

108 - See the study by Generalmajor K. Seibt (July 1945, Karlsruhe Document Collection), page 15.

to take charge of the emergency airfields designated for the use of the air transport units¹⁰⁹; members of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division were assigned to act as maintenance personnel. The transport aircraft were bogged down to their axles in the deep sand covering these airfields¹¹⁰.

The parachute and air landing troops were billeted in tents in the immediate vicinity of their take-off airfields¹¹¹. Everything seemed to be ready - except that the gasoline for the transport aircraft had not arrived! Only with the greatest of difficulty could the gasoline needed for the first transport wave be procured and the aircraft fueled in time to take off on schedule¹¹². It took five days before a satisfactory gasoline supply system could be established.

The troops occupied the waiting time in studying their operational plans, packing supply containers for later air drop runs (see photographs on the following page), and in being instructed by military medical officers in the maintenance of health and fighting ability¹¹³.

109 - See page 15 and 16 of the present study.

110 - Generalleutnant von Heyking, Study No. 638, dated 16 April 1947, page 3 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

111 - Generalmajor K. Seibt, Study dated July 1945; on page 14 we find the following: "... during the period from 10 through 12 May the final decision was made regarding the location of the airfields to be used. With this information in hand, logistical planners could begin to distribute the parachute and air landing unit to tenting areas near the airfields. Luckily, the British had left some 2,000 tents behind in the Piraeus when they evacuated the Greek mainland..."

112 - See Chapter V, Section 4, of the present study.

113 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, No. 1091/41, dated 14 May 1941, classified, "Special Instructions for the Medical Services - Operation MERKUR" (Karlsruhe Document Collection). Among other things, this Directive dealt with the prevention of malaria by means of carefully-controlled daily doses of Atebrine, the first-aid treatment of snake bites and scorpion stings, the utilization of portable filter apparatus to obtain germ-free drinking water, and the prevention of amoebic dysentery.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

The two photographs above show troops packing supply containers at airfields in central Greece. Each container was clearly labeled by its color and markings to show what it contained and for whom it was destined.

CHAPTER VI

The Plan of Attack.

Section 1 - The Two Alternatives.

The air landing units were on their way to central Greece; the Quarter-master Staff of the XI Air Corps was doing its best to improve the inadequacy of airfield facilities and to establish a gasoline supply line for the air transport units. Representatives of the top-level agencies involved in the planning of Operation MERKUR had come together in Athens for a last-minute joint session. On 16 May 1941 there were conferences between the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, General Jeschonnek, representatives of the Fourth Air Fleet, General Student, and General von Richthofen¹¹⁴. The plan ultimately accepted at these conferences was, in a way, a compromise solution.

There were two distinct possibilities for carrying out an air landing operation on Crete¹¹⁵:

1. The western portion of the island - approximately the area between Malemes and Chania - could be seized first by parachute and air landing forces and the rest of the island gradually occupied by ground attack moving from west to east.

This plan had the very important advantage that the invaders could achieve a tremendous concentration of force in a single area and thus a relatively rapid and decisive victory. This prospect was all the more tempting in view of the fact that the VIII Air Corps

114 - Lt. Col. Deichmann, "Einfuehrung zum Balkanfeldzug" (Introduction to the Balkan Campaign), page 12.

115 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 7.

would be able to provide concentrated air support for the approach flight and the landing action and to furnish consistent air cover for the subsequent ground fighting.

The main disadvantage inherent in this plan was the inevitability of a long and difficult struggle over mountainous terrain, for it was certain that Suda Bay and the airfields located in the eastern half of the island would enable the enemy to bring in the reinforcements he needed to maintain a strong defense indefinitely. To be sure, it seemed highly unlikely that the British would attempt to land reinforcements by day in the face of such overwhelming German air superiority. Even strong elements of the VIII Air Corps, however, which were to move forward to the airfield at Malemes as soon as it fell into German hands, could probably do little to prevent the enemy's landing reinforcements under cover of night.

The plan (which had been worked out by Fourth Air Fleet planners¹¹⁶) had an excellent chance to succeed if the majority of the parachute troops could be landed deep in enemy territory, with only the minimum number needed to contain the enemy being dropped directly into the enemy positions.

Simultaneous dummy attacks at other points on the island, carried out with paratrooper dolls and automatic noise-makers¹¹⁷, were planned to dissipate the enemy's defenses and to create confusion during the first, decisive minutes of the landing operation.

2. The plan put forward by the XI Air Corps¹¹⁸ envisioned simultaneous attacks

116 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, Part C, I, a, page 7.

117 - Dummy attacks and their accomplishment are described in detail by the author in the study "Westfeldzug 1940" (The Western Campaign of 1940). They were planned for Crete as well, but had to be dropped because no aircraft could be spared to carry them out.

65-a

118 - See Generaloberst Student's report to Professor Suchenwirth under date of 12 March 1955, Karlsruhe Document Collection. The following is quoted from section 4 thereof: "The attack was my plan ..."

at approximately seven different points on the island. The advantage, of course, lay in the rapidity with which key areas could be brought under control¹¹⁹, thus expediting the final occupation of the island.

This virtue was outweighed by an insurmountable difficulty - the German forces, especially the transport aircraft with their load limitations of twelve paratroopers at a time, were simply too weak. Moreover, the VIII Air Corps was patently unable to provide adequate air cover for simultaneous operations at a number of different landing points. Any landing force which happened to encounter particularly strong enemy defenses would be far too vulnerable to total destruction.

Without doubt the plan had great merit, in that the enemy would be given less opportunity to recover from the initial surprise. On the other hand, just what did German intelligence know about the enemy? All things considered, very little! And it was chiefly this uncertainty about the enemy situation which led the planners to reject the proposal of the XI Air Corps, coupled with the realization that the VIII Air Corps could hardly be expected to provide adequate support for several simultaneous attacks on various parts of the island¹²⁰.

Section 2 - The Advantages and Disadvantages of the Various Operational Possibilities. The Final Decision.

The plan submitted by the Fourth Air Fleet envisioned the immediate establishment of a clearly recognizable main focus of operations. Representatives of the XI Air Corps, however, raised the objection that there would be no way to exploit

119 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 8.

120 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 13.

this bridgehead effectively inasmuch as the enemy, supported by strong naval forces, would have time to land ship-borne reinforcements at almost any point on the coast of Crete. Moreover, the enemy's defensive forces in the island would be able to cut off the landed paratroopers and air landing troops in the mountains; in addition, the enemy could do much to delay a rapid advance to the east by simply blocking the island's single usable highway along the coast.

In summary, the following factors made it extremely difficult to evaluate the military situation and to reach a definite decision regarding which attack plan was the more promising.

1. Because of the isolated position of the island, reconnaissance of enemy positions and evolution of a detailed picture of the enemy situation could be accomplished only by means of aerial reconnaissance. And despite the fact that the aerial reconnaissance forces did their best, the data they gathered were not nearly specific, or accurate enough. As far as the aerial photographs were concerned, "there was nothing to be seen in them..."¹²¹

2. The assembly of the parachute and air landing units and the concentration of such a large number of transport aircraft in one place were bound to be noticed, thus making it impossible to keep the preparations for Operation MERKUR, a secret. As a result, the invading force could hardly hope to surprise the enemy, and this in turn nullified one of the most important advantages normally accruing to an attacking paratrooper force.

3. Royal Navy strength in the eastern Mediterranean, under the command of Admiral Cunningham, was made up of both heavy and light units¹²², most of them stationed at Alexandria. It was clear that an enemy naval force of these proportions

¹²¹ - Diary of the Storm Regiment, Volume II (document), page 16.

67-a

122 - Winston Churchill, The Second World War; on page 287 Mr. Churchill lists the following forces by name: three battleships, one aircraft carrier, twelve cruisers (nine light, three heavy), twelve destroyers, landing barges, and other minor naval craft.

was capable of warding off a landing from the sea anywhere on Crete (if a sea landing should be planned in conjunction with the air landing, for example), particularly in view of the relative weakness of the German naval forces and those of her allies. And this deterrent ability would be a danger until a final decision had been reached regarding the outcome of the struggle between the German Luftwaffe and the Royal Navy. The majority of the Italian fleet was tied to its own home harbors; it was highly unlikely that it would come forth to provide support in Operation MERKUR.

In short, it was evident that Crete could be invaded only by means of a landing from the air.

4. The comparatively great distances separating Crete from the take-off bases occupied by the air landing forces in central Greece¹²³, the fact that the majority of the approach flight route lay over water, and the relatively large size of the island¹²⁴ made it imperative that the German invaders (i.e. the XI and VIII Air Corps) capture Crete's three airfields immediately and eliminate any chance of effective counter-action on the part of the enemy air units stationed there. Needless to say, it was of the utmost importance that the airfields be captured intact so that they could be utilized to accommodate the transport aircraft right away. These two tactical requirements naturally presupposed an operational method with two very distinct objectives, a difficult problem under any circumstances and all the more so in view of the speed with which the operation had to be carried out.

After careful deliberation, the final plan decided upon by the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe,¹²⁵ reflected acceptance of the necessity for seizing the island's three usable airfields (Malemes, Rethymnon, and Iraklion) in a sudden coup de main at the very beginning - as a necessary premise to successful accomplishment of the air landing. An additional, fourth group was to carry out attacks on the capital city of Chania and Suda Bay in order

68-a

to paralyze military leadership on the island

123 - The average distance was approximately 185 miles.

124 - 155 miles in extent from east to west.

125 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 8, paragraph c.

and to tie down the enemy troops, which were presumed to be strongest in these two areas.

The attacks on the airfields and on Chania had to be scheduled in two separate phases, so that the VIII Air Corps would be able to provide air support for the entire operation. The schedule was as follows:

Phase 1 - attack on Malemes and Chania, to begin at 0705 on X-day

Phase 2 - attack on Rethymnon and Iraklion, to begin at 1515 on X-day.

This decision actually represented a compromise between the two invasion plans discussed above. It had the advantage of making it impossible, from the very beginning, for the enemy to employ his own air forces effectively against the invading paratroopers or to undertake any large-scale redistribution of the defending force.

Even today, though we are aware of the tremendously demoralizing effects of the attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps and possess exact information on the location and strength of the enemy positions as well as on the topography of Crete, it is not easy to decide which of the two suggested plans would have resulted in the quicker victory with the fewer losses. If all of the invading paratrooper units had landed at one single point, it is hardly likely that the British would have marshalled their entire defensive strength for a counter-attack at this point. After all, they had no way of knowing how large Germany's paratrooper reserve might be! "The XI Air Corps could just as well have been only one of half a dozen air landing units; it was not until months after the occupation of Crete that we were sure it was the only one..."¹²⁶.

126 - Winston Churchill, The Second World War, page 285.

Section 3 - The Evaluation of Aerial Photographs.

The data gathered by the aerial reconnaissance forces proved to be of very little use to the parachute and air landing forces¹²⁷. This may have been due, in part, to the lack of practical experience on the part of the XI Air Corps' reconnaissance squadrons. The air landing operations in Norway, Holland, and Belgium had been subject to such rigorous security measures (in order to assure a surprise attack in each case) that aerial reconnaissance over enemy territory was not permitted prior to the launching of the operation.

In the case of Operation MERKUR, however, the gathering of information on the enemy situation and the furnishing of data on which to base the selection of the best possible landing areas were tasks which could be accomplished only by aerial reconnaissance forces - particularly in view of the fact that the available maps of Crete were often difficult to interpret and highly inaccurate.

The aerial photographs taken by the Italian Air Force, although out of date and taken from very high altitude, were hurriedly enlarged and large quantities of very poor prints made. A number of them showed unmistakable evidence of alterations designed to give support to wishful thinking¹²⁸.

127 - So far the author has had no success in locating any of the original aerial photographs made by the three reconnaissance squadrons belonging to the VIII and XI Air Corps. Thus the present section could be based only upon the author's own recollections and a few isolated comments found in the various sources consulted. Continued efforts are being made to locate some of the original photographs, many of which are in the possession of private parties.

128 - The author recalls, for example, an aerial photograph of northwestern Crete, about the size of a towel, on which a large airfield was sketched in the vicinity of Kastelli. Presumably it had been "recognized and identified" as an airfield. An olive oil refinery was outlined as an "aircraft hangar" and the beach labelled as "runway" - in blissful disregard of the intervening ditches and the sand.

The evaluation of aerial photographs was admittedly inadequate and incapable of providing the operational planners with more than an incomplete and, in fact, often inaccurate picture of the enemy situation. As ^{an} inevitable result, the plans would not possibly take the true state of affairs into full account.

There is no evidence of any lack of effort or efficiency on the part of the reconnaissance squadrons. On the contrary, their daring low-altitude runs often provoked enemy defensive fire, and there were a number of casualties among squadron personnel¹²⁹. Crete's subtropical climate, with its ubiquitous haze and its blinding contrasts between light and dark, made the task all the more difficult. The enemy's remarkably effective camouflaging, his deceptive measures¹³⁰, and his strict discipline made it quite impossible to obtain more revealing aerial photographs.

Section 4 - Difficulties in the Field of Supply and Logistics - Ground

Organization - Signal Communications Network - Transport Facilities -
Take-off Bases (Airfields).

Inasmuch as the damaged railway line could not be repaired within the short time available, all supplies had to be transported by sea¹³¹. Obviously, the German Navy had an all-important role to play in the preparations for the landing on Crete. It had been requested by the Fourth Air Fleet to place the necessary sea transport space and - insofar as it was able - an adequate escort for the transports at the disposal of Operation MERKUR. Taking into consideration the imminent threat represented by the British fleet, its task was by no means an easy one¹³².

129 - Captain Lampertsdoerfer, for example, Commander of the Aerial Reconnaissance Squadron, XI Air Corps, was killed during a reconnaissance flight over Crete on 9 May 1941.

130 - Dummy installations!

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131 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 2.

132 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 7.

The ports of destination for all supply transports were the Piraeus and Corinth¹³³. The majority of ships, plagued by submarines and delayed by the continuing need for extreme caution in negotiating mine-infested waters, did not begin arriving until 17 May 1941.

Arriving in the partially destroyed harbors, the ships were unloaded by members of the German Mountain Infantry Division, and by Greek laborers. Supply goods were moved on to their final destination by provisionally organized supply columns, made up of troop transport vehicles. These were able to get through on the few and terribly overcrowded highways of Greece only after surmounting considerable difficulty and causing not a little friction. The XI Air Corps had no supply organization at its disposal for such operations; everything had to be improvised¹³⁴.

Although the provisional "supply columns" were augmented by forces from the Fourth Air Fleet and the Twelfth Army¹³⁵, they still had space only for the most urgently needed supplies. The worst bottleneck was in the supply of aviation gasoline. The tanker fleet was too slow and too small. Moreover, the storage tanks at the Piraeus were equipped with highly inefficient pumping facilities - with a capacity of only 600 barrels per day¹³⁶. There were no gasoline trucks available for transport from the harbor to the airfields. As a result, the gasoline had to be pumped from the ship into barrels (see the photograph on the following page), loaded into vehicles, and driven to the airfields. There the aircraft had to be refueled by hand - a very time-consuming affair.

133 - W. Gaul, "Operation MERKUR", in "Europäische Sicherheit" (European Security), Issue 4, 1951, page 3.

134 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 7.

135 - The Headquarters, XI Air Corps, had been assigned only a "staff, senior column commander" (Stab eines höheren Kolonnenführers) under General-major von Mackensen. The Air Corps had to provide the vehicles.

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136 - Generalmajor Seibt, report dated July 1945, page 12 (Karlsruhe
Document Collection).

PHOTOGRAPH

Gasoline requirements for the XI Air Corps had been computed on the basis of the following factors¹³⁷:

1. The average distance between Greece and Crete is 220 miles.
2. Each Ju-52 needed 530 gallons for each trip, both ways.
3. Thus, approximately 500 transport aircraft would need nearly a quarter of a million gallons for one single mission (208,030 gallons, to be exact).
4. Ideally, at the time the operation started, there should be enough gasoline available at the airfield to guarantee that each aircraft could fly a minimum of three missions. In other words, nearly three quarters of a million gallons would have to be delivered and stored in the primitive fashion just described. The shortest distance between harbor and airfield was nineteen miles; the longest, 155 miles.
5. All in all, the transport aircraft would fly an approximate total of ten missions each¹³⁸.

137 - Summary prepared by the author on the basis of the sources consulted, in particular the study by Lt. Col Hormung, "Fallschirm- und Luftlandeeinsatz Kreta" (The Employment of Parachute and Air Landing Forces on Crete), 20 March 1955, page 37 ff. Hormung's figures on gasoline consumption are based on 0.594 gallon of B-4 fuel (87 octane) per 0.621 mile for a Ju-52 with three MBW-132 engines.

138 - According to the War Diary of General Conrad, the aircraft participating in Operation MERKUR used 21,100 cubic feet of gasoline, or 26,885 barrels of 53-gallon capacity, during the period 20 through 31 May 1941. Author's Note: It was not only the distance between central Greece and Crete which had to be covered. The haze and dust clouds hanging over the airfields in Greece frequently forced the transport aircraft to circle about for hours (personally experienced by the author!) waiting

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138 - (cont) until the rest of the unit had assembled so that the actual flight could begin. The same thing (i.e. circling above the air-field) was true of the landing after the return flight. As far as Crete was concerned, conditions were not much different. During the transport of the Mountain Infantry Division to Malemes, landing frequency was no more than one aircraft every five minutes.

There was no possibility of bringing in the gasoline by air before the operation, because all the Ju-52's were urgently needed to participate in the air landing itself.

Gasoline was transported by ship to the Piraeus and Corinth over two different routes:

1. from Rumania (Constanza) through the Aegean,
2. from Italy through the Corinth Canal.

The unfortunate explosion of 26 April 1941 had demolished the bridge over the Canal, and some of the debris was still blocking the Channel. Divers with underwater tools had to be brought in to remove it and to clear a passageway for ships. The Greek divers were unable to accomplish the job, so German personnel from Kiel with better equipment were brought in by air; they began work on 15 May 1941¹³⁹.

139 - Generalmajor Seibt, report dated July 1945, page 19 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

In their preparations for the air landing on Crete, the XI Air Corps and the flying units concerned were dependent upon a poorly organized and numerically weak ground organization in a country which had just come into German hands. And inasmuch as the Fourth Air Fleet, given over-all responsibility for Operation MERKUR, was simultaneously engaged in preparations for the coming campaign in Russia, there was little hope of ameliorating the situation in Greece. Most of the work was done by prisoners without adequate supervision - by hand, without tools of any kind.

The airfields and roads suffered particularly from the lack of an adequate ground supporting organization. Only three advanced airfield commands from the VIII Air Corps had any kind of ground service system at all.

"The two Air Corps had to take over ground organization services themselves"¹⁴⁰.

This meant additional improvisation! For example, an older Army officer assigned to one of the perfectly inadequate fields as airfield commander had the runway leveled off with ploughs and harrows - the result was such a dense pall of dust that it was impossible for aircraft to take off in quick succession for close formation flight...¹⁴¹.

"The airfields were deserts in which the heavily laden aircraft sank in up to their axles in fine, powdery sand."¹⁴² Whenever an aircraft took off or landed, it was enveloped in clouds of dust rising as high as 3,300 feet,

140 - Quoted from the Fourth Air Fleet's Report on Crete, page 3. This passing the buck for responsibility of one of the most important functions of an air fleet naturally led to friction rather than to cooperation - as the comment clearly indicates.

141 - Based on a report to the author by Colonel H. Goetzel. Col. Goetzel was a member of the group responsible for reconnoitering airfields for the XI Air Corps (stationed at Topolia).

142 - Generalleutnant Ruediger von Heyking, Study No. 638, "Einsatz Kreta des K.G.z.b.V. 2" (Employment of the 2d Special Duty Bomber Wing in Crete), page 3 ff.

and hanging over the airfield in the dry heat of the windless valleys.

The dust could be laid somewhat by fire-fighter platoons and sprinkler trucks to wet down the roads, but relief was very shortlived. The overcrowded conditions at the majority of the airfields were bound to have a detrimental effect on the accomplishment of the operation. Most of the fields were so small that only one squadron could take off in quick succession at a time¹⁴³. As practice take-offs revealed, it took seventeen minutes for the dust to settle sufficiently and visibility to improve enough for the next take-off. It took over an hour before a transport wing whose aircraft took off from two different fields was fully assembled in the air and ready to begin its flight. These practice take-offs proved to be necessary to permit computation of the time needed to get a unit into the air, in formation, and on the way to its appointed target.

It was nothing less than miraculous that the aircraft engines, though covered with a thick coat of red sand, managed to stand up under the strain.

On 16 May 1941 three ships docked at the Piraeus with supplies for the troops fighting in Crete. Since these supplies were not in pre-packed air drop containers¹⁴⁴, they had to be packed for transport by untrained personnel unfamiliar with the proper techniques for packing such items as ammunition, food, drinking water, etc. The packing of air drop containers requires practice and skill (see the photograph on the following page) in order to assure that the supplies packed will arrive at their final destination in fully serviceable condition.

143 - Generalleutnant von Heyking, study No. 638, page 5.

144 - Even since August 1940, nearly all the pre-packed containers had been stored at Laon in preparation for Operation SEELOEWE (Sealion).

PHOTOGRAPH

Two possible methods were taken under consideration for the delivery of supplies to the troops, viz:

1. the immediate initiation of air supply operations from the airfield at Megara (the airfield lying closest to the warehouses of the Piraeus),
2. the use of light and, later on, heavy vessels.

The second method, of course, presupposed the capture of suitable harbors on the northern coast of Crete, particularly Iraklion and Chania, and later on of the harbor at Suda Bay. As a result, a small naval group was detached to accompany the first air landing unit to Crete in order to reconnoiter the harbors and to set up

suitable unloading areas¹⁴⁵.

The fleet of "light" transport ships (i.e. the motor boats) was loaded with the gear which the parachute regiments had not been able to take with them¹⁴⁶ - weapons, ammunition, signal equipment, medical supplies, motor-cycles, etc. - rather than with the usual type of supplies. The heavy transport ships were to bring over such items as tanks, artillery pieces, anti-aircraft guns, ammunition, motor vehicles, etc.

Time was too short to fit the troops with light-weight tropical clothing. Thus the paratroopers landed in Crete in their heavy jump suits - woollen trousers, heavy shirts, overalls, arm and leg pads. This uniform was hardly adapted to the climatic conditions of the south, and it proved a considerable hindrance to its wearers in the accomplishment of their mission¹⁴⁷.

During the pre-employment medical orientation of the troops, the greatest emphasis was placed on the prevention of malaria. Portable water filters were brought from the Army supply depot at the Piraeus in a concentrated effort to obviate the spread of dysentery and other tropical diseases. The spirit of cooperation existing between the Luftwaffe and Army medical authorities in their joint work to preserve the health and fighting ability of the landing force was exemplary. Whenever additional medicine, medical personnel, or equipment were needed, a Ju-52 was dispatched to the home area and the required items were made immediately available¹⁴⁸.

145 - Generalmajor Seibt, study dated July 1945, page 7; the naval group was under the command of Lt Senior Grade (Kapitänleutnant) Bartels.

146 - Meindl Group, Operations Branch Report No. 104-41, classified, 13 May 1941, paragraph 1 ff.

147 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, Report No. 1839/41, classified, 2 October 1941, page 7.

148 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, Diaries as edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 11 ff.

The difficulties involved in establishing an adequate signal communications system could not be overcome so easily. The available manpower and equipment was simply not sufficient to restore such a large ⁴area, so recently devastated by war that everything had to be built up from scratch. The signal regiments of the Fourth Air Fleet were already working on preparations for the Russian theater of war and could not be spared for Greece; the signal units belonging to the two Air Corps were already overburdened¹⁴⁹. Sabotage by enemy agents was frequent and effective and communications lines were often disrupted just when they were most vitally needed. Here, too, the lack of personnel and equipment made it impossible to ameliorate the situation.

In the remote and mountainous section of Greece, signal communications lines had to bridge enormously long distances in order to connect the many units operating there with their headquarters and with each other. The need for a effective wire communications system was all the more urgent, inasmuch as the danger of enemy monitoring made radio communication inadvisable during the assembly and deployment of the invasion force.

The headquarters staffs of both the VIII and the XI Air Corps were located in Athens (though not in the same part of the city), while the Fourth Air Fleet had detached only a small advance staff to the Greek capital. On 9 May 1941¹⁵⁰ the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff arrived at Fourth Air Fleet headquarters, reducing to a minimum the delay involved in obtaining top-level decisions. The communications system hurriedly set up to serve the flying units and the troops assigned to the various airfields proved highly unsatisfactory and even during the first few days of operations led to unpleasant and far-reaching friction¹⁵¹. The lack of a

149 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, pages 2 and 3.

150 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 3, paragraph 6.

151 - Chapter 8, Section 3, 1, of the present study.

signal communications company with the express and exclusive mission of serving the Greek airfield area (actually a responsibility of the Fourth Air Fleet) made itself painfully felt. Instead, the 41st Signal Battalion, XI Air Corps, was forced to furnish the personnel needed to establish and maintain the communications network¹⁵².

The antiaircraft artillery forces suffered from a similar shortage in personnel and equipment. And in view of the large number of targets in the troop assembly area which required protection from enemy air raids, their mission was almost impossible of accomplishment. Within the assembly and take-off areas assigned to the two Air Corps (in central and southern Greece), there were only sixteen heavy and seventeen light antiaircraft artillery batteries available to defend a total of fifteen airfields as well as the harbors of the Piraeus and Corinth¹⁵³. Searchlights were not to be had. In order to provide some sort of protection against low-altitude raids on the airfields and tenting areas, the troops had to furnish and man their own machine guns.

During the day the enemy aircraft steered clear of the Greek mainland as a rule. It was chiefly the British night raids that caused the damage; the losses suffered by the VIII Air Corps, especially, were very high¹⁵⁴.

Summary

A well equipped take-off area is of vital importance to the success of an air landing operation. The take-off area for Operation MERKUR, located in a part of Greece which was still in enemy hands at the time the first operational orders were issued and

152 - Generalmajor Seibi, study dated July 1945, page 15.

153 - See Appendix 3 of the Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete (The Employment of Antiaircraft Artillery in the Troop Assembly Area").

154 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 13. In accordance with this source, the British carried

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154 - (cont) out a twin-engine fighter raid on the airfields in the vicinity of Athens on 17 May 1941. Five German aircraft were destroyed and thirty-eight damaged! The attack took place during the night...

the troops were beginning preparations for the move to their assigned assembly points, was by far the worst yet encountered since the beginning of the war. Its many inadequacies were bound to have an adverse influence on the course of the events. Its poorly equipped airfields and its appalling lack of aerotechnical service facilities made the take-off one of the most exasperating factors of the entire operation against Crete¹⁵⁵.

There was no clear division of responsibility among the supply units of the XI Air Corps. Instead of their being separated into two over-all groups, one to handle supply services in the take-off area and the other to arrange for supply reinforcements into the target area, a single agency was responsible for both functions¹⁵⁶. The inevitable result was a high degree of improvisation.

The uncertainty of the gasoline supply was a source of danger for the entire operation. If the enemy should employ unexpectedly large air and naval forces to repel the invasion, any bottleneck in the gasoline supply line could spell automatic failure for the attackers.

Due to the fact that they were so overburdened with secondary and even trivial problems during the preparatory period, the air transport units, the parachute forces, and the air landing troops had little opportunity to prepare themselves psychologically for the coming operation.

Section 5 - Postponement of the Original Invasion Deadline.

Hitler had set 15 May 1941 as the date for launching the operation against Crete¹⁵⁷. The belated arrival of the supply ships and the difficulties

155 - General Student, at a command conference held on 25 September 1941.

See Appendix Volume II, page 3, paragraph 2.

156 - This agency was the Office of the Quartermaster, XI Air Corps (Lt. Colonel Seibt).

157 - See page of the Introduction to the present study.

encountered in moving adequate stores of aviation gasoline to the take-off airfields necessitated postponement of the original deadline - first until 18 May and then until 20 May. The two factors just named were of such vital importance that it was unthinkable that the offensive could be launched so long as they were still unsettled.

Did this postponement represent an advantage or a disadvantage as far as the strength of the invader's position was concerned? There are two diametrically opposed views in this connection.

1. Generaloberst Student is of the opinion that the invasion of Crete would have been far easier if it had been undertaken at a later date¹⁵⁸.

"The heavy increase in shipping traffic in Suda Bay, noted by our reconnaissance aircraft at the end of April 1941, was due to purely technical reasons.

It represented nothing more than an intermediate stop-over for the British troops which had been expelled from Greece and were on their way to Palestine or Egypt for reformation. They were prevented from leaving the island by the growing intensity of the air attacks carried out by von Richthofen's forces ... Thus the German attacks had the effect of holding a strong enemy force on Crete against its will. Finally, as it became apparent that a German invasion of the island was in the offing, no further attempts to move these troops were made. Obviously, the German invasion of Crete was just a few weeks too early!"

2. The VIII Air Corps¹⁵⁹ continues to defend the view that every single day's

158 - See "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), special issue dated May 1953, "Crete, the Turning Point for Germany's Parachute Forces", page 3.

159 - As one of a number of examples, the reader is referred to a letter to the author from General der Flieger Rudolf Meister, Retired, (dated 7 July 1956). A more detailed account of the difficulties and conflicts among high-level command agencies will be found in Chapter 6 of the present study.

delay in the parachute landing would give the enemy additional time in which to organize the defenses of the island, to provide the troops fleeing from the Greek mainland with new supplies of weapons and ammunition, and even to bring in additional forces from Egypt.

When it became known that the island's defenses had been placed under the command of General Freyberg, a highly competent officer from New Zealand¹⁶⁰, German planners could hardly assume that an officer of such renowned capabilities would be appointed merely to clear the island and to expedite the transfer of the British troops to Egypt and Syria. Then, too, Churchill - as Great Britain's Premier - was a devotee of the World War I concept of planning, namely that an invasion of the European mainland could best be accomplished from the southeastern Mediterranean¹⁶¹. Only uncontested possession of the island of Crete could offer the British a chance to try out this theory during World War II.

It was undeniable that any delay in the launching of the attack served to strengthen the enemy's defenses. Even so, there were a number of advantages inherent in postponement, viz:

The constant bombardments and low-altitude harassing raids carried out by the VIII Air Corps helped to weaken the morale of the defenders. In addition, the intensity of the German attacks forced the majority of the enemy air forces stationed on Crete to withdraw

160 - D. M. Daving, Crete, London 1953, page 41 ff.

161 - Examples of this concept were the British landing at Gallipolli (on the Dardanelles) in April 1915 and the Anglo-French landing at Salonica in October 1917 (?).

to Egypt¹⁶², so that there was hardly any enemy fighter defense by the time the paratrooper invasion began.

The delay gave the ground forces extra time to accustom themselves to the subtropical climate, and to perfect their preparations for the operation. Nevertheless, compared with the six months of preparation for the occupation of Fort Eben Emael, the period available in the case of the Crete landing was far too short.

A further advantage in postponement lay in the off-chance that additional information regarding the enemy situation might be received during the days between deadlines, that the aerial reconnaissance forces and agents might bring in new and important data. As a matter of fact, a number of corrections were made in the aerial photographs already on hand. In one instance, the reports of agents familiar with the island were instrumental in identifying a horseshoe-form line of structures, assumed to be antiaircraft artillery or machine gun positions, as lime kilns¹⁶³. The agents also uniformly reported that the British showed no signs of reducing troop strength on the island (17 May 1941).

The ground situation was also subjected to reappraisal and correction. According to agent reports, large-scale tenting areas (near Skines and Furnes, southwest of Chania) which had been presumed to harbor British forces were in reality occupied by Italian prisoners of war.

The enemy air force on the island had been reduced from thirty-nine to thirty-three aircraft¹⁶⁴. The German air situation reports mention the occasional appearance of Bristol-Beaufighters and Hurricanes. German air attacks on Suda Bay were met

162 - Based on a letter from General der Flieger Meister to the author, page 2, paragraph I.

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163 - Hqs, XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Enemy Data Sheet No. 3, I, c,

dated 17 May 1941. Compilations of data on the enemy situation by the Fourth Air Fleet and the VIII Air Corps are not available for reference.

164 - Based on comparison of the Enemy Data Sheets (Hqs, XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch) for 14 May 1941 (No. 2) and 17 May 1941 (No. 3).

by strongly concentrated antiaircraft artillery of all calibers.

Reports on the development of the naval situation during the period between the original deadline and the newly established one indicate that mines were laid along the northern coast of the island toward off even small boats¹⁶⁵. German aerial reconnaissance units noticed a sharp increase in shipping traffic in the harbors on the southern coast of the island, especially at Ierapetra. It could not be determined whether loading or unloading operations were in progress or whether the cargo consisted of troops, foodstuffs, or other supplies¹⁶⁶.

On the whole, it would seem that the postponement of the original invasion date by a few days had relatively little influence on the course of events. The important thing, of course, was to make certain that all the fighting in the Balkan theater of operations (including the invasion of Crete) should be concluded prior to the beginning of the campaign against Soviet Russia (scheduled for 22 June 1941).

This was clearly a prerequisite, for each unit tied down elsewhere by operational necessity meant a reduction in the striking power marshalled to destroy the Russian enemy as rapidly as possible. It is difficult to judge the extent to which this might have applied to the parachute and air landing forces, for there is no way of telling where and under what circumstances their employment during the initial phase of the Russian campaign could have led to an ultimately successful outcome¹⁶⁷.

165 - Hqs, XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Enemy Data Sheet, No. 3, II, e.

166 - Hqs XI Air Corps, Intelligence Branch, Enemy Data Sheet No. 3, 2, d (pertaining to the landing of reinforcements) and D.M. Davis, Crete, page 76 ff (British and German Preparations).

167 - General Meindl, Memorandum "Einsatz der Fallschirm- und Luftlandetruppen im Osten" (The Employment of Parachute and Air Landing Forces on the Eastern Front), 11 March 1942, Karlsruhe Document Collection.

CHAPTER VII

The Pre-Invasion Softening-Up by the VIII Air Corps.

The period during which the VIII Air Corps carried out attacks on Crete designed to prepare the way for the parachute and air landing operation extended from 3 May¹⁶⁸ through the early morning hours of 20 May 1941.

It was clear that this battle between the air force of a continental power and the island base of a sea power would have to be carried on even after the island had changed hands¹⁶⁹, and it was equally clear that its ramifications would reach out far beyond the Aegean¹⁷⁰.

Even a much stronger air landing force would have been shot to pieces by battle ship and cruiser-based enemy artillery if the German Luftwaffe had not succeeded in clearing the waters around the island of all enemy naval forces. In the beginning this was the case only during the daylight hours; later on, when German and even Italian air units began to participate in operations

168 - The most important source in the preparation of Chapter 6 of this study is the War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen as edited by Colonel Deichmann. The following is quoted from page 5 thereof:

"...on 3 May 1941 we bombarded Suda Bay, where five warships and sixteen merchant ships were lying at anchor."

169 - General A. Wittmann, in the operational reports of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, compiled in issues 1 through 3 of the monthly publication "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry). See issue 1, 1954, page 27 ff.

170 - The book Wir Kämpften auf dem Balkan - VIII Fliegerkorps (We fought in the Balkans - VIII Air Corps), compiled by Captain Freiherr von Heintze, Dr. Guentz, Dresden, 1941, presents a copiously illustrated report of the exploits of the VIII Air Corps in the Aegean and on Crete.

from bases located on the island itself or at Scarpanto, and when Italian pocket battleships began to force their way into Suda Bay, the enemy naval forces were expelled from the Aegean and the Straits of Caso, at the eastern edge of Crete, were blocked to sea traffic¹⁷¹.

The attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps on the island of Crete and the coastal waters surrounding it can be divided into several separate phases.

Section 1 - Disruption of the Enemy's Preparations for the Defense of the Island.

1. Attacks on the antiaircraft positions set up at the potential landing areas¹⁷².

Transport aircraft flying at an altitude from 330 to 490 feet and at the relatively slow speed required for releasing parachute forces are inevitably a highly vulnerable target of almost barndoor size for enemy antiaircraft artillery of all calibers. Accordingly, the chief mission of the VIII Air Corps' dive bombers was to eliminate enemy antiaircraft artillery emplacements located near the airfields and at the paratrooper release points. The high degree of effectiveness achieved by the VIII Air Corps is apparent when we note that only seven Ju-52's (out of a total of approximately 500) were lost as a result of antiaircraft artillery fire during the entire operation on Crete¹⁷³, and this in spite of the fact that enemy preparations in this regard were extremely thorough.

171 - General Domenico Ludovico, report in "Revista Aeronautica" (Aeronautics Magazine), Volume XXVI, No. 7, 1950, page 15 (of the photocopy).

172 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 14, paragraph 2, mentions the elimination of enemy antiaircraft defenses at the paratrooper landing areas as the most vital goal for the supporting air units. The XI Air Corps' Report (Part I, pages 14 and 15) states that the invasion of Crete on 14 May 1941 was immediately preceded by an air raid to eliminate enemy antiaircraft artillery batteries.

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173 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 15, paragraph II. There is no breakdown available for the figure of 143 Ju-52's lost during Operation MERKUR (given by General Conrad in his War Diary). In this context, the reader is referred to Appendix V of the study by W. Hornung dated 20 March 1955, Karlsruhe Document Collection

The VIII Air Corps faced an even more frustrating situation than the XI Air Corps as regarded the procurement of aviation gasoline, ammunition, etc. The first item to become unavailable was bombs¹⁷⁴. For the most part, the supply line was maintained by air transport (carried out by the VIII Air Corps itself) as far as the take-off bases¹⁷⁵.

174 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, as edited by Colonel Deichmann, page 8.

175 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, as edited by Colonel Deichmann. The following is quoted from page 59: "In evaluating the success of the VIII Air Corps in Crete, we must give due credit to the transport units - the Beckmann group. They were faced with tremendous distances between the supply bases and the advanced operational airfields being used by the VIII Air Corps, and these distances had to be covered under incredibly bad weather conditions and with appallingly little support in the way of adequate aerotechnical services.

Our flying units were absolutely dependent upon the supply runs flown by the transport aircraft. All of our aircraft - dive bombers, single-engine fighters, ground support aircraft, twin-engine fighters, bombers, and reconnaissance aircraft - would have been grounded without them. The average distance covered by each transport aircraft each day was 1250 miles.

The air transport group chalked up a total mileage of 1,250,000. (In the opinion of the author, this figure must include the miles flown during the Balkan campaign as well; there seems to be no distinction made between the Balkan campaign and the operation on Crete). During this period they transported more than 1,102,300 lbs. of bombs, 3,968,316 lbs. of miscellaneous supplies, and 3,762,385 lbs. of aviation gasoline and aircraft lubricants."

In addition, the majority of the ground organization personnel were also moved by air.

During the preliminary operations in Crete, the air transport group was charged with responsibility ^{for} of the initial equipment as well as the continuing supply of the airfields located on the islands of Rhodes and Scarpanto.

2. Attacks by bomber aircraft on the bivouac area south of Malemes (near Chania).

There are very few military barracks in Crete and the ones which exist (at Iraklion, Rethymnon, Chania, and Suda Bay) are extremely small. As a result, the majority of the British and Greek troops on Crete were lodged in bivouac areas and provisional barracks in the vicinity of the potential parachute and air landing points along the northern coast. The scattered and primitive native settlements were obviously incapable of offering billets fulfilling even minimum hygienic requirements¹⁷⁶. The units of the VIII Air Corps, relying partly on intelligence data and partly on pure intuition, subjected these billeting areas to constant bombardment in an attempt to weaken enemy strength¹⁷⁷.

The bombardments, in turn, were inextricably connected with:

3. Attempts to disrupt enemy communications.

In an effort to cut off the defending troops from their command headquarters, the roads leading to and from the larger towns and cities were blocked by bombardment¹⁷⁸. This goal was commensurate with the thinking that the attack plan of the XI Air Corps would lead automatically to success provided that the enemy could be prevented from shifting his defense forces from one point to another during the first day of the air landing operation¹⁷⁹. Nonetheless, the success of the attacks carried out by the

176 - In the recollection of the author, who spent several weeks on Crete (most of them in a tent), the houses inhabited by the rural population of the island were usually of clean and inviting appearance, despite the fact that they abounded in bugs of all varieties. The private villas of wealthy merchants were occasionally commandeered as billets for staff personnel or as hospital buildings.

177 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 14.

178 - These attacks were, for the most part, complete and utter fiascos! The

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- 178 - (cont) British, warned in plenty of time by their smoothly-functioning aircraft warning network (which included ship-based observation stations - equipped with radio - in the Aegean Sea north of Crete), were able to reach their previously prepared dug-outs before the bombs began to fall. The reader is also referred to C.M. Davin, Crete, Chapter 12, page 456 ff.
- 179 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, Section C, page 14.
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VIII Air Corps was won at the price of a fairly serious risk if we consider the amount of guesswork involved in the official evaluation of the enemy situation¹⁸⁰.

As a result of other, inviolable deadlines, both time and ammunition were in relatively short supply¹⁸¹, which made it extremely difficult to complete the preliminary preparations for Operation MERKUR. As General von Richthofen expresses it, "... every single bomb had to be subjected to the most grudging scrutiny before it was free to be utilized."

Section 2 - The Expulsion of the Alexandrian Fleet from the Waters north of Crete (the reader is also referred to page ff).

"... Finally, on 22 May, we received a report to the effect that the contingent based in Alexandria (consisting of two battleships, one aircraft carrier, four cruisers, and fifteen destroyers) was on its way to Crete..."¹⁸². These brief statement gives full expression to the uneasiness felt by the majority of clear-thinking military experts. The parachute and air landing forces could probably be brought to Crete with little or no difficulty. But how would they be able to hold their own if ocean supply lines should be disrupted?

The paratrooper units, who had already experienced British ship-based artillery (Narvik, 1940), issued special combat orders¹⁸³. Any intervention on the part of the very strong British naval units,

180 - The following statement appears in Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen's diary under date of 17 May 1941: "Even today we have absolutely no definite information regarding the strength and will to resist of the defending force on Crete..."

181 - See the diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, page 13; General Jeschonnek, Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, insisted that preparations be cut short.

182 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, War Diary, page 16 ff.

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183 - Meindl Group, Operations Branch, Order No. 102/41, dated 14 May 1941, classified, paragraph 8. This order contains the following instructions:
"The air landing force is to seek cover against the cliffs rising from sea in case of ship-based enemy fire. Naval artillery is relatively powerless against narrow-mouthed foxholes..."

reinforced by additional units summoned from Malta or Cyprus, must be prevented at all costs by means of attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps¹⁸⁴. The Italian naval forces stationed in the Aegean were not equipped to provide really effective protection. They had six torpedo boats based at Scarpanto and Rhodes, which were to operate together with a force of German dive-bombers to block the Cavo Straits, on the eastern coast of Crete. As was inevitable in view of the vastly superior British strength, they failed miserably in the beginning.

German military leaders were, as a matter of fact, fully aware of these developments; however, they were firmly convinced of the fact that the British aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean (Formidable¹⁸⁵, Ark Royal, Argus, Furious, and Victorious¹⁸⁶), which would have represented a very serious danger, would not be committed in the battle for Crete because of their extreme vulnerability. Even a minor hit, serious enough to damage the take-off deck, was capable of putting an aircraft carrier out of action for a fairly long time. During the period in question, the British carriers were engaged in transporting troops and aircraft to the Near East¹⁸⁷.

The area of operations assigned to the VIII Air Corps in the eastern Mediterranean, i.e. over the waters surrounding the island of Crete, encompassed a number of focal points for action against the Royal Navy.

184 - Especially since the X Air Corps was still stationed in Sicily at that time.

185 - The Formidable was badly hit by German dive-bombers from the 2d Dive-Bomber Wing (based in Africa) northwest of Alexandria on 26 May and was put out of action as far as operations in the Mediterranean were concerned.

186 - The War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, page 10 ff.

187 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen's War Diary makes special mention (pages 16 and 17) of the transport of 140 Hurricanes and 18 Fulmars to the Near East in early May 1941. In this connection, see also Churchill, op.cit., page 292: "How fortunate that the HMS Formidable was not sent into action - she would surely have been sunk ..."

1. Heavily-armed and fast-moving British naval units, including submarines, were stationed directly north of Crete, presumably with orders to head off any force attempting to invade the island from the sea and to hold any enemy force landed by air under constant fire.

2. The British supply line, the only route by which troops, ammunition, weapons, and other supplies could be brought in to reinforce the island's garrison, ran along the southern coast of Crete.

3. Crete's harbors, particularly Suda Bay, were of great importance to the British forces.

British naval operations, under the direction of Admiral Cunningham, encircled the island of Crete from the east and west, the naval units approaching by way of the Straits of Case, on the one side, and Cythera, on the other. In addition, the battleships Warspite and Valiant, protected by an escort of eight destroyers, were anchored northwest of Crete under the command of Admiral Hawlings, ready to meet the anticipated intervention of the Italian navy¹⁸⁸.

The British fleet, despite its superior strength, was at a distinct disadvantage in that the British air bases in the Near East were too far away to permit direct air support. In addition, the "closely limited" area of operation and the weather conditions obtaining therein¹⁸⁹ also proved to be unfavorable factors for the British. The prevailing haze and light cloud cover served to assist the VIII Air Corps in its attacks. Moreover, the British naval forces were close to exhaustion¹⁹⁰ inasmuch as they had been on uninterrupted duty in the Mediterranean theater since the end of February, i.e. since the start of operations in Greece.

188 - Churchill, op.cit., page 287.

189 - Churchill, op.cit., page 292 ff.

190 - Based on a report from the British Commander in Chief in the Mediterranean to the Admiralty (Churchill, op.cit.).

On the other hand, we must take into consideration the fact that the VIII Air Corps, as a "ground support force", was entirely unfamiliar with its new mission of combatting enemy forces at sea. Furthermore, the relatively limited range of the aircraft model in use at that time made the long approach flight over the Aegean somewhat of a trial for the crews.

The "softening" air attacks carried out against Crete by the VIII Air Corps during the last half of May 1941, had the approximate effect of a blockade of the island. Less than 3,000 of the 27,000 tons of supplies which the British attempted to ship to the island were successfully landed¹⁹¹. In addition, the problem of landing troop reinforcements became more and more difficult as the VIII Air Corps attacks became more intense.

General Freyberg, in command of the defending force, was convinced that his troops were adequate to their mission provided that they could be reinforced with weapons and vehicles landed on the island¹⁹². It was due to the dive-bombers and bombers of the VIII Air Corps that these reinforcements did not reach Crete.

On 18 May 1941, Suda Bay was subjected to bombardment by three bomber groups from the VIII Air Corps¹⁹³. All the enemy ships lying at anchor in the harbor were hit by German bombs; the cruiser York exploded. The port area was so covered with smoke and haze that pinpoint bombardment was out of the question.

The air landing on Crete would have been quite impossible without the successful operations of the VIII Air Corps against the British naval forces.

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191 - Churchill, op.cit., page 278.

192 - Churchill, op.cit., page 281.

193 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, page 15.

Section 3 - Achievement of Air Supremacy over the Aegean.

Enemy air attack represented the most serious danger during the relatively slow approach flight of the German transport aircraft to the island of Crete and during the landing of parachute forces over the island. Accordingly, the elimination of the enemy aircraft based on Crete (insofar as possible) was incorporated into preliminary planning.

Air supremacy over the island, at least during the daylight hours, was reckoned to be of primary importance to the successful outcome of the air landing operation.

As of 1 May 1941, there were six British Hurricanes and seventeen "old-fashioned" aircraft based at the airfields of Crete¹⁹⁴. These air forces were strengthened during early May, so that by the time the German air attacks began, the island harbored twelve Blenheims, six Hurricanes, twelve Gladiators, and six Fulmars and Brewsters combined¹⁹⁵. According to reports, however, only 50% of these aircraft were actually operable. The majority of the enemy aircraft were based at Iraklion; only the fighters utilized Malemes and Rethymnon as take-off fields.

The enemy aircraft strength must have been subject to constant fluctuation, for it is extremely unlikely that the forces detailed above could have carried out the frequently mentioned bombardment of the Greek take-off bases utilized by the VIII and XI Air Corps¹⁹⁶.

194 - Churchill, op.cit., page 274.

195 - Churchill, op.cit., page 279 ff.

196 - War Diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, pages 14 and 15. The entry for 18 May 1941: "Our airfield is attacked during the night by a force of fifteen British bombers ..."

We can only assume that Crete was utilized as an intermediate landing field for British air units stationed in Egypt and charged with the accomplishment of air attacks on the European Continent.

Beginning with 18 May 1941, the VIII Air Corps concentrated its operations on the three airfields of Crete. All day long, small bands carried out harassing attacks on the British air bases on the island. A total of fifteen British machines was destroyed - with no German losses whatsoever¹⁹⁷.

Before long the British had no alternative but to reorganize their hopeless inferiority in the air; in consequence, they transferred "the remaining aircraft" to bases in Egypt¹⁹⁸.

Summary

There are various views regarding the effectiveness of the attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps, insofar as they concerned the island itself.

"... we know less than nothing about the enemy situation. We never hear anything but rumors, and we know well enough how much faith can be attached to those".¹⁹⁹

"... since the bomber pilots had no exact information as to the British defense positions, any hits achieved were the result of pure luck. The over-all effectiveness, as a result, was comparatively slight ..."²⁰⁰

197 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, War Diary, page 15.

198 - Churchill, op.cit., page 279.

199 - General der Gebirgstruppen Julius Ringel, Retired, "Hurra, die Gams!" (Three Cheers for the Goat!), in praise of the exploits of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, Leopold Stocker, Graz and Goettingen, November 1956, page 64.

200 - Ringel, op.cit., page 81.

The two opinions just quoted are typical of the view held by the German Army. Representatives of the VIII Air Corps, however, were just as firmly convinced of the efficacy of the operations they had carried out. "... this (i.e. air attack) was the only way in which the organization of Crete's defenses could be rendered more difficult and the fighting morale of the defending force subjected to systematic weakening".²⁰¹ It was due to the attacks of the VIII Air Corps that the majority of the enemy air forces withdrew to Egypt, as a result of which the German air landing operation encountered no fighter aircraft whatsoever.

Evaluation of aerial photographs of the island was of no value whatsoever. The mountainous character of the landscape, the haziness so characteristic of the island's weather conditions, and the relatively strong enemy antiaircraft artillery all combined to make it impossible for the German reconnaissance forces to obtain usable data, especially in view of the excellent camouflaging techniques employed by the enemy.

Suda Bay was full of sunken ships²⁰², which created a great deal of difficulty for British naval maneuvers; these could be carried out only under cover of darkness in view of the ever-present threat of enemy air attack.

The preliminary battle between the German Luftwaffe and the British naval forces in the eastern Mediterranean found its culmination in the overwhelming success achieved by the VIII Air Corps. If this success had been properly exploited, the British position in the Mediterranean could have been considerably weakened²⁰³.

201 - Based on a letter to the author from General der Flieger Rudolf Meister, Retired, under date of 7 July 1956, page 2, paragraph IV.

202 - The reader is also referred to D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 86: "List of ships sunk or damaged in Suda Bay - warships and merchant ships". During May 1941, nine warships were sunk, including one heavy cruiser. During the same period, approximately 50,000 tons of transport shipping, including one 10,000 ton oil tanker, were also destroyed.

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203 - Churchill, op.cit., page 304; also Chapter VIII, Section 4, page
of the present study.

CHAPTER VIII

The Order to Attack.

At the instigation of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe²⁰⁴, the special orders issued for Operation MERKUR²⁰⁵ encompassed the following points:

1. The XI Air Corps, as a part of the first attack wave, was to take possession of the airfield at Malemes and the enemy strongholds at Chania and Suda Bay during the forenoon of the first day of operations (see the chart on the following page).

2. The second wave, to be flown during the afternoon of the first day of operations, was to capture the airfields at Iraklion and Rethymnon.

In order to carry out these missions effectively, the XI Air Corps divided its total available strength (i.e. its own parachute forces and the airborne infantry troops from the 5th Mountain Infantry Division) into three separate combat units, as follows:

1. Combat Group West, under the command of Generalmajor Meindl (Commanding General of the Storm Regiment), consisted of the Storm Regiment plus reinforcements.

2. Combat Group Center, led by Generalleutnant Suessmann (Commanding General, 7th Air Division), was composed of the 2d and 3d Parachute Regiments, corps and division specialized units, and one mountain infantry regiment. (Combat Group Center represented the focal point of operations as far as coordination of the whole was concerned - it was responsible for integrating movements in various part of the island.)

3. Combat Group East, under the leadership of Generalleutnant Ringel (Commanding General, 5th Mountain Infantry Division) was made up of the 1st Parachute Regiment and the majority of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division. (This was to be the point of main activity as far as the air landing itself was concerned.)

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204 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 13, paragraph II.

205 - Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operational Orders dated 12 May 1941,
Attack Orders for Combat Group West, Operations Branch, File No. 120/
1941, classified, dated 17 April 1941, etc.

The German plan of attack for Crete had been worked out with painstaking care and with great attention to detail. Objectively speaking, there was no reason why the island could not be occupied in a sudden coup - provided there were no unforeseen difficulties to contend with.

Successful invasion of the island was based on the fact that there were three airfields available. If one of these should fail to be captured during the initial phase of the attack, there always remained the possibility of deviating German air traffic to one of the others which was already in German hands. In short, the invading force had three irons in the fire - one of them was bound to lead to success.

The invasion orders issued to the XI Air Corps made it unmistakably clear²⁰⁶ that the island of Crete was to be brought under German control to serve as a base from which air warfare could be carried on over the eastern Mediterranean.

On the other hand, these orders make no mention whatsoever of a contemplated subsequent action against the Suez Canal or to relieve the troops fighting in North Africa. This is probably due to explicit orders from Hitler himself; as we have already pointed out, he considered the occupation of Crete a fitting conclusion to the Balkan campaign rather than the beginning of a new series of operations.

The orders dealt with the usual evaluation of the enemy situation with conspicuous brevity - for the simple reason that next to nothing could be discovered about it²⁰⁷.

The suggested plan of operation provided for the landing of the XI Air Corps in two waves for the following reasons:

206 - Appendix 4, Operations Orders, XI Air Corps, dated 12 May 1941, page 1.

207 - Appendix 4, page 1, paragraph 2 (which refers to three enemy data sheets containing obsolete information).

1. The available transport aircraft were not numerous enough to be able to land combat units at all the attack points at the same time, and
2. It was extremely important that the VIII Air Corps be on hand to provide effective air support during the thick of the struggle.

Germany's experience so far (especially that gained during the operations in Holland in 1940) had demonstrated clearly that one airfield was not enough for the accomplishment of a large-scale air landing operation²⁰⁸. Accordingly, the orders called for the simultaneous capture of a number of enemy airfields. All three - Malemes, Iraklion, and Rethymnon - were to be taken without delay²⁰⁹.

The missions to be accomplished by the three combat groups were as follows:

1. Combat Group West

In examining the contemplated plan of attack against the Cretan airfields, the observer is struck by the fact that it makes consistent use of the lessons taught by Germany's previous experience in the field of parachute and air landing operations. For example, strong advance "commando units"²¹⁰, reinforced by paratroopers, were supposed to capture the most significant enemy positions by means of "surprise attacks"

208 - These are Generaloberst Student's exact words, as appearing in his article in the special "Crete" number of "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger" (The German Paratrooper), May 1955, page 2, column II.

209 - General der Gebirgstruppen Julius Ringel, op.cit., as a self-styled (page 58) "ground tactician of the old school", has the following to say: "There was only one possibility, and even that was an extremely hazardous one. All the same, it was far more pleasant to me and my fellow 'ground fighters' than leaping into the midst of the enemy without the advantage of surprise. That possibility was that the majority of the paratroopers should land on the relatively easily negotiable terrain southwest of Malemes and then proceed as a single, unified force against the smallest of the Cretan airfields. To be sure, the defenders would be in a position to bring up reinforcements along the northern coast

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209 - (cont) but in order to do so, they would be forced to depend upon the island's one east-west highway, and the latter was extremely vulnerable. If our German dive-bombers should succeed in destroying any section of it, the whole road would be rendered impassable to all wheeled traffic. Moreover, the constant danger of air attack prevented the defenders from using the road except under cover of darkness, while German air superiority enabled us to carry out any movements we pleased during the daylight hours. Subsequent events substantiated the accuracy of this evaluation of the situation..." (page 58).

210 - The "commando units" were special units from the Storm Regiment which were landed by freight glider.

from the air. Freight gliders were to be sent directly into enemy positions in the vicinity of the airfield and into identified antiaircraft artillery and radio stations (eg. Eben Emael). Paratroopers were to be dropped in a ring, with defensive as well as offensive duties, around the target (see the diagram on the following page).

We have already mentioned the fact that the possibility of a surprise attack had been ruled out completely.

The Storm Regiment was to seize the airfield at Malemes at Y-hour, X-day ²¹¹.

The orders go on to say that the VIII Air Corps was to provide air support for the Regiment in the form of bombardment attacks from Y-hour minus 30 to Y-hour ²¹². At Y-hour, twenty-nine freight gliders from the I Battalion, Storm Regiment, were to land around and to the south of the airfield at the same time as the three other battalions from the Regiment were dropped by parachute in a semi-circle around the field.

The capture of the airfield at Malemes, as the opening wedge in the occupation of Crete, was to be effected during the first hour of the invasion by means of the encirclement action described above. The Storm Regiment appeared to be strong enough to spare almost an entire battalion for security and reconnaissance duties west of the airfield ²¹³, in order to head off anticipated counter-attacks from the west and the south. German intelligence had no data whatsoever available regarding the strength of the enemy forces stationed in the northwest corner of the island,

211 - Y-hour was the moment at which the first wave was to appear over the target area.

212 - See Appendix 3.

213 - II Battalion, Storm Regiment, the unit to which the author belonged.

in the Kastelli-Kisamos area. In addition, there was always the possibility that freshly landed enemy reinforcements could advance to the defense of Malemes from the southern part of Paleochora.

There were five distinct missions assigned to the Storm Regiment:

1. capture of the airfield at Malemes in a coup de main,
2. elimination of any obstacles to the coming landing of the Mountain Infantry troops,
3. securing the airfield and protecting it against enemy artillery fire,
4. armed reconnaissance to the west and the south, and
5. establishing and maintaining contact with Combat Group Center (Chania).

Once the first of the above goals had been achieved (capture of the airfield), the next mission was to keep it free of enemy harrassment on all sides.

The following missions were explicitly assigned²¹⁴:

1. protection of the invasion force against enemy ship-based artillery fire,
2. surveillance of air cover, and
3. marking the line of advance for the operational planning of the German Luftwaffe.

The mobilization of the air landing force posed a serious problem. All the vehicles and beasts of burden captured on Crete were channeled through a central distribution depot, which assigned them to the various units in accordance with the priority of their missions.

Signal communications activity, antiaircraft defenses, and antitank defenses had to be coordinated orally among the responsible units of the invasion force, due to the

214 - Appendix 3, page 3, paragraphs 5 through 7.

uncertainty inherent in the necessary expedient of dropping the equipment involved by freight parachute (no guarantee that it would land at the proper point, that it would actually be recovered, or that it would not be damaged by the impact of landing).

Each paratrooper carried with him enough food to last for two days. After this, the air landing force was to find its subsistence on the island itself until such time as a smoothly functioning supply line could be established²¹⁵.

We have at our disposal a detailed directive on the "Coordination between the Ground Forces and the VIII Air Corps"²¹⁶. Among other things, this directive established uniform code designations to camouflage certain specific target areas during radio communication and a uniform sign language to guide in the planning of Luftwaffe supporting operations. For example, the following signs were used:

- + - staff
- ✕ - supply drop point (for the air drop of supplies, ammunition, food, etc.)
- ^ - enemy resistance (with the apex pointing in the enemy's direction)
- ⌒ - enemy resistance in 4000 feet.

Each unit had been issued a series of "target maps"²¹⁷. These helped a great deal in preventing mix-ups in target location; they had the added advantage of being overprinted in German, thus eliminating any confusion which might have arisen as a result of the Greek designations of geographical terms. All tactical

215 - Appendix 1 of the operational orders issued to the "Stentzler Group" (II Battalion, Storm Regiment), dated 18 May 1941, Karlsruhe Document Collection.

216 - This directive is included as Appendix 4 of the operational orders issued to the "Stentzler Group". The code designations and symbols

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- 216 - (cont) described were to be utilized by all air landing units, paratrooper forces, and mountain infantry troops.
- 217 - The author still has in his possession an authentic target map prepared for the invasion of Crete. The geographical names are printed in Greek, and the German translations, printed above the originals, often leave a great deal to be desired.
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instructions were issued exclusively in code in the interests of preserving the highest possible degree of secrecy.

The directive also prescribed preparations in the medical field, consisting of the assignment of responsible medical officers to each group, the establishment of field hospitals, and the development of a system for transporting the wounded from the island²¹⁸ by the following:

1. the emergency squadron assigned to the medical staff,
2. the transport aircraft
3. by ship.

The dangers of infectious tropical diseases were emphasized.

The special troop units belonging to the Corps, the Paratrooper Anti-aircraft Machine Gun Battalion, the 41st (motorized) Luftwaffe Signal Communications Battalion, etc., were distributed among the various groups (as the Paratrooper Medical Battalion had been) and were instructed to receive their orders from the group staff, most of these orders to be oral rather than written²¹⁹.

During the initial phase of the battle there was little chance that the paratroopers would be able to organize a reserve force after landing. Even so, orders were issued to the effect that each group was to set aside a strongly armed force of battalion strength as a reserve for the Corps, once the initial mission had been accomplished²²⁰. It can be assumed (although this is not specifically mentioned in the directive) that these reserves were to be employed to clear things up in the interior of the island.

2. Combat Group Center

The attack orders for Generalleutnant Suessmann's Combat Group Center differed from those issued to the Combat Group West in that the strong force

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- 218 - Hq, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, IVb, File No. 1091/41, classified,
dated 14 May 1941, "Special Instructions for the Medical Service".
- 219 - Hq, XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 9.
- 220 - Hq, XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 5a.
-

scheduled for commitment in the Chania and Rethymnon areas could not be transported to Crete in a single wave; two flights were necessary. Thus, there was no possibility of taking the enemy by surprise in the middle sector of operations.

Making up the first wave, the 3d Parachute Regiment (under the command of Colonel Heidrich) was to be dropped in a broad valley lying some two miles southwest of Chania in the direction of Alikianu. Its mission was the destruction of any enemy troops encountered in the area and the elimination of the island's top military headquarters²²¹.

Two companies from the Storm Regiment, equipped with twenty-four freight gliders, were detached to the 7th Air Division to seize the enemy antiaircraft artillery positions just east of Chania and a radio station located to the south of the city²²². The Parachute Engineer Battalion, 7th Air Division, was given the task of capturing a reservoir and power station southwest of the operations area of the 3d Parachute Regiment (see the map on the following page). Here, too, the VIII Air Corps was expected to furnish strong air support.

The second wave, consisting of the 2d Parachute Regiment (under the command of Colonel Sturm), was to take possession of the airfield at Rethymnon as well as of the city itself. Inasmuch as the Regiment had only three relatively small combat units (their combined strength less than that of three battalions) to accomplish this mission, the closing paragraph of the order - to the effect that the Combat Group Center,

221 - Hq, XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 3, paragraph 5b.

222 - These missions have been reconstructed from the XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 11, and from other combat reports. The documents of the 7th Air Division are inaccessible, many of them being located in the Soviet zone of occupation. Major Altmann assisted the author in the work of reconstruction.

after completing its assigned mission, was to hold itself ready for further employment - seems rather pointless. This is a clear indication of the degree to which German planners underestimated the strength of the enemy and the importance of terrain and climate. The distance between Malemes and Chania was approximately sixteen miles, and from Chania to Rethymnon an additional thirty-five. Yet the officers responsible for planning Operation MERKUR failed to give any consideration whatsoever to the poor road conditions, the relative lack of mobility of a paratrooper force, the danger of guerrilla fighters, and the debilitating effects of the climate.

One cannot escape the impression that Rethymnon was included in the mission of the Combat Group Center solely to keep the airfield from being utilized by the enemy²²³.

Aerial reconnaissance had revealed the presence of a fairly large, bowl-shaped valley at Alikianu, southwest of Chania, which could be used as a landing field in the event that enemy bombardment should succeed in rendering the three regular airfields useless for any length of time. This raises the question of whether it might not have been wiser to drop both the 2d and the 3d Parachute Regiment over the Alikianu area. It is true, of course, that the valley was surrounded on all sides by steeply rising hills²²⁴. Thus, if it should turn out that the enemy had stationed a strong defense force in the hills, the valley would be a veritable trap.

Despite a number of serious reservations (chiefly because of the relative weakness of the available force, it was finally decided to go ahead with the Rethymnon mission. The decision was no doubt influenced by the consideration that the capture of Rethymnon would expedite the establishment of contact between Chania and Iraklion (a distance of more than sixty miles!)

223 - This is the view held by the author.

224 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 12, Part II.

3. Combat Group East

Iraklion, the target assigned to the Combat Group East, boasted the island's best equipped airfield. The plan envisioned the landing of the majority of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division to take the city and the port of Iraklion. Once these objectives were secured, sufficient forces would be detached to occupy St. Nicholas and Ierapetra on the southern coast²²⁵. In connection with the above plan, it was considered necessary to issue a special order emphasizing the importance of bringing in all captured vehicles (military and civilian), including trucks and busses, to increase the mobility of the landed force.

The parachute force, which was to take the airfield itself in the second attack wave (Y-hour plus eight), was made up of the 1st Parachute Regiment (under the command of Colonel Bräuer) and the II Battalion, 2d Parachute Regiment. Thus its total strength was somewhat less than four battalions.

Even assuming that everything went according to plan (that the first wave reached its goal without losses, that the transport aircraft completed their return flight smoothly and on schedule, that the second wave of transport aircraft managed to drop the paratroopers in a concentrated group over the appointed area, etc.), there would still be only a few hours of daylight in which the landing force could attain its goal with the support of the VIII Air Corps. It was clear that the enemy would make good use of the nighttime hours!

There was no chance at all that the parachute force would be able to carry off a coup de main²²⁶ or even to surprise the enemy with its attack, for the defenders would already have been warned by the preceding landings at Malemes and Chania. The German planners were fully aware of this disadvantage, as well as of that represented by Iraklion's greater distance from the take-off base in the Athens area²²⁷.

225 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 4, paragraph 5c.

226 - The term appears in the third line of Section 1 of the Order mentioned above.

227 - Iraklion lay 34 miles farther away from Athens than Malemes and Chania.

This meant almost 70 miles, or 30 minutes extra flying time, for the Ju-52's.

The reports received regarding the strength and location of the island's defense forces were so vague that there seemed to be no reason for qualms concerning the weakness of the individual units making up Combat Group West, Center, and East²²⁸.

On the basis of the situation as it was known to German planners, there was no reason why the invasion of Crete, carried out according to the plans described above, should not lead to rapid and complete success.

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After outlining the objectives to be gained and the tactics to be followed on the ground, the Directive goes on to discuss the instructions applicable to the air transport fleet and to the VIII Air Corps.

The Air Commander, XI Air Corps, (Generalmajor Conrad) was responsible for the move by air from the Greek mainland to Crete.

Special instructions were issued concerning the smooth loading of ground units and the coordinating of take-off times, flight routes, and flight altitude (see the sketches on the following page). It was imperative for the success of the over-all invasion that the first wave of transport aircraft should appear over Crete exactly at Y-hour in a single, unified group.

It was just as important that the second wave (arriving at Y-hour plus eight) should take off as a unit and drop its paratroopers as a unit in the prescribed area. For only if the transport aircraft approached as a unit could they be

228 - Generaloberst Loehr, Commander of the Fourth Air Fleet, is supposed to have said, "We can take Crete with one single parachute regiment!" (verbal information given to the author by Generalleutnant Trettner). Generaloberst Student, writing his memoirs for the magazine "Weltbild" from the vantage point of the present, utilizes the phrase, "I had miscalculated!" (Ich hatte mich verrechnet) as the title of his article on Crete.

effectively protected in the air by the VIII Air Corps. The escort periods²²⁹ had been worked out exactly on the basis of the performance capacity of the transport force. Any delay in the transport action was therefore bound to reduce the effectiveness of the air cover provided during the approach flight and during the landing operation. On the other hand, if the transport aircraft should be ahead of schedule, there was the danger of their dropping the paratroopers into the midst of an VIII Air Corps "softening" attack. The only solution was to set up an absolutely fool-proof flight schedule for the trip to Crete, with exact instructions for fast aircraft, slower aircraft, and very slow aircraft (those towing the freight gliders). More than 1000 aircraft would be in the air at the same time, all of them following the same relatively narrow flight course.

The western tip of the island of Cythera (south of the Peloponnesus) was selected as "jumping-off point" for the first wave; up to that point, the transport aircraft would benefit from extra protection provided by German anti-aircraft artillery.

The difficulties encountered by the air transport units during the night of 19/20 May 1941 (the night before the operation) are described as follows:²²⁹

"If the take-off was to be accomplished on schedule (i.e. at 0500 on 20 May 1941), some way had to be found to get the wing into the air in close formation in the shortest possible time. A trial assembly with subsequent take-off by squadron was ordered, and the wing was lined up by squadrons, one on the tail of the other.

The take-off was carried out squadron by squadron in close formation..."

229 - General von Heyking, Study No. 168, dated 16 April 1947, page 4 ff.

A second source continues:²³⁰

"Conditions were highly unfavorable to the operation.....

The transport units possessed practically no information regarding the enemy's strength. Moreover, during the night before the operation - 19/20 May 1941 - the wind changed direction by 180°, making it necessary to rearrange the line-up for take-off - all in the dark. Naturally, this last-minute change resulted in a delay in the take-off..."

In addition to the difficulties detailed above, the leaders of the transport units were quite aware of the fact that further delays in taking off were bound to occur due to the clouds of dust which smothered the airfield after each departure. On the other hand, the orders were very firm in specifying that the transport units must reach the target as a single group. The result was that the paratroopers and transport crews, instead of relaxing and getting some sleep before going into action, were gotten out of bed and marched (the troop transport trucks were all carrying gasoline!) to the airfields. The take-offs, instead of beginning at 0500, got under way at 0235. Once in the air, the transport aircraft were ordered to keep circling over the airfield until they were all assembled at the proper altitude and ready to take off in a group²³¹.

In the last analysis, the actual circumstances under which the air transport was carried out had very little in common with those described in the order to attack. The commanders of

230 - W. Hornung, op.cit., pages 10/11 and page 12.

231 - Based on the orders issued to the author's unit, the II Battalion, Storm Regiment, and on marginal notes entered on the orders at that time.

both air transport and paratrooper units had to rely on their own initiative and on the effectiveness of verbal agreements to provide for the margin of safety which no order can dictate in advance.

The Directive devotes only two lines to the transport of troops by ship²³², merely observing that any troops and supplies which cannot be transported by air will be moved to Crete by ship.

The German Navy had two missions to accomplish in connection with Operation MERKUR:

1. The transport to Crete of the supplies needed (weapons, bombs, gasoline, aviation fuels, Luftwaffe equipment, and foodstuffs) to assure that the landing force did not bog down during the initial phase of the fighting.

2. The accomplishment of other transport actions made necessary by Operation MERKUR²³³.

In preparation for the above, the Admiral (Southeast) took immediate steps to have all arriving supply vessels earmarked for further employment in Operation MERKUR as soon as they were unloaded - a necessary measure in view of the shortage of otherwise available merchant shipping. To begin with, the vessels on hand were to be supplemented by twelve ships withdrawn from transport duty in the African theater. Unfortunately, the blockade of the Corinth Canal intervened, making it impossible for the warships and merchant vessels coming from Italy to get through to join the forces of the Admiral (Southeast).

Since it was so uncertain whether the additional ships would be able to arrive in time or not, an early attempt was made to secure for Operation MERKUR the facilities represented by the small native coastal vessels. The plan was to utilize them as a first transport wave to the island as soon as appropriate

232 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 5, paragraph 7.

233 - Office of the Admiral (Southeast), (Schuster), Report on Operation MERKUR, File No. 8689, classified, dated 16 June 1941, page 2 ff.

landing areas had been brought under German control. The use of these smaller boats was definitely advantageous in that the risk inherent in the admitted naval supremacy of the enemy during the hours of darkness was divided among a large number of vessels. Furthermore, if the paratroopers should be unable to secure a satisfactory landing area in time to accommodate the airborne infantry, scheduled to arrive on the second day of operations, all available merchant ships and coastal vessels were to stand by to transport the mountain infantry troops to the island.

Both the Admiral (Southeast) and the Commander, Fourth Air Fleet, (whom Admiral Schuster kept informed of developments) were well aware of the alarmingly high degree of improvisation which characterized these naval operations. The vessels had been commandeered without advance notice, and there had been no time to test their seaworthiness. They were very poorly equipped as far as navigational aids were concerned; radio and signal equipment were conspicuously absent.

Two squadrons of motor-powered sailboats were formed²³⁴, one to land at Malemes and the other at Iraklion. Each squadron was assigned an Italian torpedo boat as escort, the Italian captain being placed in charge of the naval aspects of the operation. Each torpedo boat also carried a German naval officer in the capacity of convoy commander. The Italian warships were to be responsible for keeping their squadrons together and on the proper course, for defending them against enemy submarines, and for acting as radio relay station for the entire group. In view of the heterogeneous composition of the two squadrons and the resultant differences in attainable speed, there was no alternative but to issue orders not to wait for stragglers but to leave them behind if necessary.

²³⁴ - Office of the Admiral (Southeast), Operations Order No. 1, dated 17 May 1941, classified; the reader is also referred to the report dated 23 May 1941

234 -(cont'd) by Commander Devantier on the activities of the "Western"
Malemes) squadron during Operation MERKUR (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

As regards the tactical planning of the operation, both the "Maleme^f" and "Iraklion" squadrons (each consisting of twenty boats) were ordered to put in at the intermediate harbor of Melos. They were to proceed from Melos at such a speed that the Malemes group would reach its destination on the afternoon of X-day plus one and the Iraklion group on X-day plus two.

At the same time, two Italian mine-sweeper units were to move forward to Melos in order to be immediately available as soon as Suda Bay and the port of Iraklion should fall into German hands. Their task then would be to clear a channel large enough to permit the entry of the regular merchant ships, which would be ready and waiting to leave the Piraeus together with an escort of torpedo boats as soon as the signal should be given. A detailed time schedule for all of these actions was set up²³⁵.

In order to assure successful accomplishment of the naval transport missions, a certain amount of offensive action was necessary. Inasmuch as the naval force itself was too weak to provide this, it was imperative that the VIII Air Corps take over the task of keeping enemy naval elements out of the waters north of the island during the daylight hours.

It was only during the day, of course, that the VIII Air Corps was able to keep the area under sufficiently continuous surveillance to forestall any attempt at intervention on the part of the British fleet²³⁶. For the reconnaissance aircraft, bombers, and dive-bombers had to be back at their primitive

235 - More detailed information can be obtained from a number of sources contained in the Karlsruhe Document Collection, specifically from the operational orders of the Admiral (Southeast) and the various combat reports dealing with Operation MERKUR. General Ringel (op.cit.) also gives accurate and detailed descriptions of the units to be transported by ship.

236 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 8c.

take-off bases on the Greek mainland by dusk. This was one good reason behind the order to move the fighter and dive-bomber units to the captured airfields at Maleme^f and Iraklion at the earliest possible moment²³⁷.

The orders calling for the employment of VIII Air Corps single-engine and twin-engine fighter units to ward off enemy air attack during the approach, air drop or landing, and return flight of the transport aircraft²³⁸ seem to be rather an empty formality in view of the following factors:

1. the enemy air forces originally stationed on Crete had either been destroyed or withdrawn,
2. there was no reason to expect that the British would bring their aircraft carriers into action during the early stage of operations,
3. the distance separating Egypt and Crete seemed an effective guarantee against the possibility of a large-scale bombardment by British air units, and
4. the German Luftwaffe had overwhelming air superiority.

The VIII Air Corps was also given the task of guarding the ocean transports to Crete against attack by enemy air or naval forces²³⁹. This mission, like all those assigned to the VIII Air Corps, was limited to the daylight hours. As soon as darkness fell, the slow little boats were defenseless against enemy attack, and a very high percentage of them were sunk²⁴⁰.

237 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 8g.

238 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 5, paragraph 8a.

239 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 6, paragraph 8d.

240 - See Chapter VIII, present study.

Of even greater significance to the conduct of operations were the orders directing the VIII Air Corps to support the ground forces by attacking clearly identified enemy targets, assembly areas, antiaircraft artillery batteries, etc.²⁴¹. Unfortunately there was no direct ground-to-air radio communication to guide the bombardiers in the placement of their bombs. All radio traffic had to be relayed through the complicated and time-consuming channel Combat Group - XI Air Corps - VIII Air Corps, which naturally resulted in delays and poorly aimed hits.

During the early stage of the invasion, the Air Landing Corps continued to maintain its headquarters in Athens²⁴², which served as a dissemination point for orders dealing with all the various phases of Operation MERKUR. The coordination of the Air Landing Corps and the VIII Air Corps, the employment of reserve forces, and the handling of sea and air transport - all of these functions could be carried out successfully only if there were a single, central command headquarters readily accessible throughout the entire course of the invasion. Moreover there were already three generals (Generalleutnant Suessmann, 7th Air Division; Generalleutnant Ringel, 5th Mountain Infantry Division; and Generalmajor Meindl, Storm Regiment) with their staffs assigned to direct operations on the island, so that there really was no need to transfer Corps headquarters to Crete during the first phase of action - i.e. before a point of main emphasis became apparent.

In conclusion, it must be admitted that the careful preparation and the thorough orientation of participating officers and troops which are reflected in the orders issued for Operation MERKUR²⁴³ gave every indication that a rapid and decisive success might be expected in Crete²⁴⁴.

241 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, paragraphs 8b and 8c.

242 - XI Air Corps, Orders for Operation MERKUR, page 7, paragraph 15.

243 - Not all of the operational orders pertaining to Operation MERKUR are available today. The most significant gaps are those left by the VIII Air Corps

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243 - (cont'd) time table of operations (see the letter from General Meister) and the documents of the 7th Air Division.

244 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part I, page 16

CHAPTER IX

The Battle of Crete²⁴⁵.Section 1 - The Transport of the Parachute Forces and the Freight Gliders
to Crete.

The weather, needless to say, is a determining factor in the conduct of an air landing operation²⁴⁶. As far as 20 May 1941 was concerned, the Chief Meteorologist (Chefmeteorologe), Fourth Air Fleet, forecast the rapid approach of stormy weather from southern Italy, presumably resulting in complete cloud cover and very poor visibility.

In contrast to this, the meteorologist of the XI Air Corps²⁴⁷ declared that the bad--weather area further west would have no effect on Crete and its vicinity and that there was every indication that the weather on 20 May would be favorable²⁴⁸.

The responsibility of reconciling these two widely-differing "expert" opinions and of deciding whether to go ahead with the operation, taking a chance on running into bad weather, or to postpone it was passed on by the Fourth Air Fleet to General Student²⁴⁹.

245 - This chapter is based largely on the XI Air Corps and Fourth Air Fleet "Reports on Crete", supplemented by reports dealing with individual combat sectors and by the personal recollections and notes of the author.

246 - For example, the carefully prepared allied air landing at Arnheim (crossing of the Rhine River in 1944), which failed in large part due to weather conditions.

247 - Regierungsrat Dr. Brandt was meteorologist of the XI Air Corps.

248 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 1.

249 - Based on information given the author by General Schlemm, Chief of Staff, XI Air Corps: "...excited telephone conversations about the weather conditions were held during the night of 19/20 May ... Student was to decide..."

German planners were fully aware that the surprise factor, normally one of the most decisive aspects of an air landing action, was out of the question in Crete. Although none of the available sources say so specifically, we can surely assume that the feverish activity going on during the night of 19/20 May - the final loading of the transport aircraft, the assembling of the troops at the take-off bases - and the highly contagious nervous tension so typical of the last hours before going into action had not escaped the attention of the enemy²⁵⁰.

It is possible that the enemy was informed through the American Embassy in Athens (America had not yet declared war on Germany), or perhaps through the highly efficient espionage network left behind by the British when they withdrew from Greece. Advanced patrol boats, camouflaged as fishing craft but equipped with radio transmitters, were on guard in the waters north of Crete.

There is no doubt but that it was these patrol boats which transmitted the first warning to the British forces on Crete, as soon as the VIII Air Corps began the all-out bombardment attack (between 0530 and 0600) scheduled to launch the operation (see the map on the following page). The Luftwaffe attacks on the enemy bivouac and barracks areas near Chania and Malemes²⁵¹, on telecommunications lines, etc. were robbed of most of their effectiveness, for the enemy forces - warned in plenty of time - were able to seek and find adequate cover in previously prepared air raid ditches.

250 - The author himself witnessed the lack of caution displayed in one of the staff headquarters in Athens (Hotel Anglais); a number of officers frankly discussed operational plans in the presence of the Greek waiters (enemy agents). They all seemed utterly unconcerned about the need for military security - an error which was to result in a good deal of bloodshed...

251 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 14, paragraph 2, I, b).

Surely such ruthless bombardment would have shattered the morale and will to resist of any other enemy and reduced him to panic-stricken helplessness - not so the New Zealanders! Their behavior reflected superior courage and discipline. It was a bit of bad luck for Germany's "bold and irreplaceable air landing troops"²⁵² that they had to go into battle against an enemy force composed of the very best soldiers of the British Empire.

The subsequent battle of Crete was unique in a number of ways²⁵³. "It was something entirely new - the first really large-scale air landing action in the annals of military history!" Just how did the fighting proceed?

The VIII Air Corps had barely concluded its preparatory bombardment missions when the first freight gliders (under the command of Major Koch) appeared over the target area, followed by 500 transport aircraft carrying a total of more than 5000 parachute troops. This force, the first attack wave, was landed i.e. by parachute) under air cover provided by the VIII Air Corps (see the sketch on the following page).

Combat Group West²⁵⁴

In spite of the inadequacies of the airfields and the terrible problem of dust, all of the transport units had been able to take off according to schedule. The approach flight, under fighter escort, was also uneventful. It was the glider landings and the paratrooper release operation which proved difficult. The gliders were released too late from the tow coupling, which meant that their gliding velocity was too high for easy maneuverability. Thus they found themselves over the target area, gliding far too fast towards a terrain which

²⁵² - W. Churchill, op.cit., pages 285 and 302.

²⁵³ - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 284

²⁵⁴ - The description of the ground fighting has been restricted to general developments; relevant details will be pointed out in the footnotes. The

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254 - (cont'd) emphasis is placed on the evaluation of the over-all situation
and on the decisions taken by command.

made a smooth landing next to impossible. Rocks and ditches, olive trees and grapevines - all represented unforeseen obstacles. The appointed landing areas lay quite far apart, so that there was little chance of one group's coming to the assistance of another²⁵⁵. In an attempt to make doubly certain that none of the paratroopers should be blown out to sea, the majority of the transport aircraft discharged their human cargo not over the level coastal plains, as had been planned, but over the mountains south of the main coastal highway (see the sketch on the following page).

Since the island's defenders had set up a series of strongly fortified positions ranging up into these mountains, a large number of paratroopers (mostly from the III Battalion, Storm Regiment) were killed or seriously wounded by enemy fire while still in the air, struggling to get out of their parachutes on the ground, or caught in the trees²⁵⁶. The ones who landed safely in the valleys had no time to assemble in an orderly group or to search for the weapons containers which had been dropped by freight parachute. Most of the containers fell into enemy hands, and the defending forces put the weapons to immediate use.

The II Battalion, Storm Regiment, landed without enemy interference in its assigned target area southwest of the airfield at Malemes. The percentage of injuries sustained during the jump was low (less than 1%).

255 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 4.

256 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 5

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Parachute and Air Landing Troops on Board the Ju-52

Above: Paratroopers (without their weapons, wearing life packets).

Below: Air landing units, armed with rifles of the 98-K type, ready for the landing. A release bay for weapons containers is shown in the background.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: The approach flight over the Aegean
Sea, 20 May 1941.

Below: Paratroopers descending over Crete.

121

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: Paratroopers landing in the middle
of a vineyard.

Below: A 37mm antitank gun is dropped over
Crete with quintuple freight parachute.

122

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Both photographs show the landing of a freight glider near Malemes; olive trees, vineyards, and irrigation ditches proved to be effective obstacles.

123

The IV Battalion, Storm Regiment, equipped with heavy weapons, ran into a group of armed civilians upon landing south of the airfield at Malemes and west of the bridge. As a result, the paratroopers were not able to recover all of their weapons and equipment. Many of the antitank weapons, motorcycles, etc. dropped with multiple freight parachutes were so badly damaged by the olive trees in which they landed that they could not be used (see the photograph below).

PHOTOGRAPH

During the landing on Crete, paratroopers often got caught in olive trees, on telephone lines, etc.

The Combat Group Staff, under the leadership of Major Braun, landed by freight glider south of the bridge in the dried-out river bed.

The 3d and 4th Companies, I Battalion, Storm Regiment, had landed by freight glider at the western edge of the Malemes airfield and on Hill 107 from which the airfield could be kept under fire (see the photographs). Only a few of the freight gliders were fortunate enough to land at their appointed landing places; the vast majority came to rest far away from their assigned targets.

General Meindl~~l~~ landed by parachute at a point west of the bridge. He was seriously wounded almost immediately and had no choice but to give up command of the Combat Group.

Combat Group Center

On the whole, General Meindl's Combat Group West had encountered relatively little defensive fire during the approach flight and landing operation and had suffered almost no losses in transport aircraft. The reception accorded Combat Group Center was an entirely different story - "... at Chania antiaircraft artillery fire blossomed forth from hitherto totally unsuspected positions..."²⁵⁷

PHOTOGRAPH

Parachute forces descending over Crete.

257 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 10.

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The freight gliders, carrying the 1st and 2d Companies of the I Battalion, Storm Regiment, were met by concentrated fire from both light and heavy anti-aircraft artillery and were thus diverted from their appointed missions. The 2d Company (led by Captain Altmann), with fifteen gliders at its disposal, was supposed to seize the enemy antiaircraft artillery posts east of Chania and on the Akroteri Peninsula. The 1st Company (under 1/Lt. Genz), with nine gliders, was to capture enemy artillery and radio posts south of the city (see the map on the following page).

PHOTOGRAPH

Landing Paratroopers from Combat Group Center.

Captain Altmann's gliders, having been released from tow at 6000^{ft.}, were unable to locate their preappointed landing points in the chaos of enemy artillery fire and landed so far apart that there was no way to render mutual assistance. The artillery positions which had been "identified" and reported as such by the German aerial reconnaissance units turned out to be deserted dummy installations. In reality the enemy had established strongly fortified positions in the hills which overlooked both the city and the northern shore of Suda Bay and had manned them with infantry troops.

1/Lt. Genz and his company were somewhat more fortunate, despite the fact that they lost four of their nine gliders (one as a result of a broken towing cable and the other three due to incredibly clumsy landings). Even so, the 1st Company was able to complete its mission with the remaining five machines.

Generalleutnant Suessmann, who had taken off by freight glider for Chania early on the morning of 20 May, was killed in a crash en route²⁵⁸. Colonel Heidrich assumed command of the 7th Air Division, retaining the command of his own regiment at the same time.

The majority of the 3d Parachute Regiment had been released according to plan over a broad basin southwest of Chania (see the photograph on the following page).

258 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 12. When the He-111 towing Generalleutnant Suessman's glider overtook the slower transport aircraft, the vortex created was so powerful that it ripped the wings off the glider. The latter crashed on a rocky promontory of the island of Aegina.

A second version, reported to the author by Major Altmann, maintains that Generalleutnant Suessmann's glider was one of those which had been used in the landing at Corinth and which had been parked outside in the burning heat ever since with nothing to protect them from the sun. The relatively flimsy and highly vulnerable construction of the gliders had simply been unable to survive the climatic conditions...

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258 - (cont) There is still a third, totally unconfirmed version of the accident, according to which the regular glider pilot, a man of long experience with both fighter aircraft and gliders, was ordered by General-leutnant Suessmann to surrender the wheel to an officer who had had no experience in piloting gliders.

PHOTOGRAPH

The landing area of the 3d Parachute Regiment near Chanis.

The I and II Battalions, 3d Parachute Regiment, and the temporarily attached Parachute Engineer Battalion all managed to land as planned. The III Battalion, 3d Parachute Regiment, however, missed its assigned landing point by several miles, its companies coming down over a widely scattered area. This, in turn, meant that their starting positions were far from favorable.

The descending paratroopers and their gear drew heavy enemy antiaircraft artillery fire, and "many of the weapons containers exploded in mid-air".²⁵⁹ Moreover, enemy artillery fire prevented a number of the transport aircraft from discharging their paratroopers on schedule, so that the latter landed either too soon or too late, as far as the original time-table was concerned. More important, the original combat units - the backbone of the over-all force - were separated and disorganized.

259 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 13.

All in all, as the transport aircraft returned to their take-off bases after having delivered the first invasion wave, the leaders of the operation could not fail to believe that "the paratrooper landing had succeeded as planned".²⁶⁰ Only 1.4% of the 500 transport aircraft were lost. The VIII Air Corps was equally optimistic regarding the success of the first landing wave. After all, its aircraft had encountered no enemy aircraft whatsoever, and enemy antiaircraft artillery had accounted for only a few instances of minor aircraft damage.

We must remember though, that the Headquarters of the Air Landing Corps in Athens had absolutely no direct information from the landed paratrooper units. Although the latter were equipped with several radio transmitters, not a single reply was received to the many urgent messages requesting additional data on the situation.

Section 2 - The Early Stages of the Ground Fighting²⁶¹.

Combat Group West

We know from the radio log of the Storm Regiment that, as of 1340 on 20 May 1941, there was still no means of communication between the parachute troops on the island and the Headquarters Staff of the XI Air Corps on the Greek mainland. The following notation appears in the log:

260 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 26. The same conclusion is expressed in the Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 18, paragraph III. Paragraph II (page 18) of the same source points out that the VIII Air Corps had held down enemy antiaircraft artillery fire very effectively throughout the operation.

261 - These are three detailed sources dealing with the exploits of Combat Group West:

- a) Storm Regiment, Combat Group West, Operations Office, Combat Report dated 7 June 1941 (report by Colonel Ramcke).
- b) Headquarters, Storm Regiment, Radio Log for the period 20 through 27 May 1941.

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261 - (cont'd)

- c) Although we have none of the 7th Air Division documents available, events can be reconstructed with relative ease and accuracy from the XI Air Corps Report on Crete.
-

"Reconnaissance aircraft delivers important orders by air drop at 1530..."²⁶²

The heavy signal communications equipment belonging to the Combat Group had been loaded into the nine freight gliders assigned to the Regiment Headquarters Staff (group under Major Braun), and these gliders landed so clumsily that not only they, but also their cargo, were damaged beyond repair (see the photograph on page 122). The signal officer of the Storm Regiment, 1/Lt. Goettsche, after hours of tireless experimentation managed to assemble an improvised transmitter from the remains of the wrecked equipment, and with this contact was established at 1615 (according to the radio log) with the Headquarters Staff in Athens.

The light-weight radio equipment, released by freight parachute during the paratrooper landing, had survived undamaged and with it the Storm Regiment established contact with its II and IV Battalions, located west of the airfield at Malemes. The III Battalion, whose members had jumped right into the midst of a strong enemy defense force, was decimated completely. Of the 600 paratroopers, 400 - including the battalion commander and the majority of the commissioned and non-commissioned officers - were dead after the first few hours of desperate and courageous resistance²⁶³.

Half of the I Battalion, Storm Regiment, having landed on the island by glider, made its way to the enemy encampment on Hill 107 only to find it deserted. Pushing on, they became involved in single combat with isolated enemy elements and were soon overrun. The battalion commander, Major Koch²⁶⁴, was seriously wounded. The glider crews, however, did succeed in eliminating the enemy antiaircraft artillery battery at the western end of the Malemes airfield. Von Plessen, the company commander, and a great many of his men lost their lives in this action.

262 - Storm Regiment, Radio Log, page 1.

263 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 5.

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264 - In 1940, Major Koch had seized the bridges over the Albert Canal during the occupation of Fort Eben Emael.

Thus the Storm Regiment had only two battalions left (the II and the IV) to seize the airfield at Malemes and to ward off the attacks of an ubiquitous enemy! What with the murderous heat, the total lack of suitable tropical clothing, and the numerically superior enemy, secure in well-camouflaged, strongly fortified positions made even more impregnable by barbed wire barriers, it is no wonder that the task at hand seemed utterly impossible for a regiment without a leader and with no more than light-weight weapons at its disposal.

Combat Group Center.

The approaches to Chania and Suda Bay were guarded by two hill positions, on the rocky Akrotiri Peninsula in the east and in the hills near the village of Galatas west of Chania. Both were manned by strong enemy forces. Captain Altmann's glider assault on Akrotiri miscarried right at the start; the gliders crashed on the rocks of the promontory, forty-eight men were killed in the fighting, an equal number wounded, and the rest taken prisoner²⁶⁵.

The enemy positions in the hills around Galatas were to be taken by the III Battalion, 3d Parachute Regiment, under the leadership of its commander, Major Heilmann²⁶⁶. The entire operation was doomed to failure due to the fact that the III Battalion landed wide of its appointed area. Coming down in the valley, the troops were soon covered by enemy infantry fire from the surrounding hills.

The Parachute Engineer Battalion, although it landed according to schedule, found itself pinned down by enemy fire²⁶⁷ issuing from hedges, trees, and field positions. This sniper harassment was so effective that the German troops were able to recover their weapons containers and withdraw to cover only under the greatest difficulty.

265 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 10.

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266 - By 1944 Heilmann had attained the rank of Generalmajor and the assignment as commanding general of the 1st Parachute Division in Italy.

267 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, pages 16 and 17.

Among the enemy forces defending the village of Alikianu, southwest of Chania, against the Parachute Engineer Battalion were also Greek civilians - including women and children - armed with shotguns!²⁶⁸

The I and II Battalions, 3d Parachute Regiment, had suffered heavy losses and were completely exhausted²⁶⁹. Under these circumstances Colonel Heidrich could not possibly risk an attack on the capital city of Chania, much less an assault on Suda Bay.

Section 3 - Crises during the Ground Fighting.

1. 20 May 1941 (morning and afternoon).

During the forenoon only the first half of the contemplated paratrooper force was landed on Crete, as the first invasion wave. Between 0800 and 1100, the transport units made their way back to the take-off bases in Greece. At this point it proved to be impossible to get the transport aircraft ready on schedule for the next wave. The take-off fields were overcrowded to begin with, and even though all the available fire hoses were pressed into service, they were unable to make much headway against the dense clouds of dust created by the aircraft landings. In addition, some of the transport aircraft which had been damaged by enemy artillery fire had to make crash landings. There were not enough tow trucks available to keep the wreckage cleared away at all times and, as a result, some of the runways were blocked²⁷⁰. Consequently, some of the transport

268 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 17. Unfortunately, such violations of international law on the part of the civilian population of Crete were by no means rare. There are, for example, several verified instances of their having behaved most barbarically, maiming and robbing German paratroopers.

269 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 18.

270 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 18, paragraph III.

aircraft were forced to circle over their home airfields for as long as two hours before the runways could be cleared for them to land.

According to the original time-table, the second wave was to take off at 1300. But what with inexperienced personnel and inadequate equipment (manual pumps) even the refueling operation took much longer than had been anticipated. As a result, the take-off operation was subject to lengthy delays, some aircraft taking off as much as three and one-half hours behind schedule!²⁷¹

Under these conditions it was clear that the planned tactical take-off order could not be maintained. This, in turn, meant that the transport units were unable to reassemble in the air as planned; they arrived over their target areas between 1500 and 1800 in small bands of three to five aircraft or, at most, in squadron strength.

The delays in the take-off operation plunged the entire plan of attack into confusion. The VIII Air Corps took off as agreed upon to cover the approach flight of the second wave, and found not a single transport aircraft to protect! The preparatory bombing raids carried out by VIII Air Corps units on the target area went entirely unexploited. They had not succeeded in destroying the enemy, of course, but merely in holding him in check for the short period during which the paratroopers should have landed. Inasmuch as the VIII Air Corps fighters had to leave the landing area by 1615 at the latest (to make sure that their remaining fuel would be sufficient to get them back to their bases), the majority of the paratroopers in the second wave had to complete their jump without air cover. Since a number of transport aircraft had been put out of action during the first wave, the Combat Group East had to be reduced by approximately 600 troops²⁷².

Inevitably, the following question arises: we know that the air transport forces reported the delay in taking off to the Air Landing Corps - why, then, was the VIII Air Corps

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271 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 22.

272 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 22.

not notified? Was this symptomatic of a lack of cooperation between the two Corps? General von Heyking has the following to say²⁷³:

"The transport units returning from the first mission were often unable to land right away because of the dust and had to remain in the air for an inordinately long time. As a result, the entire landing operation took considerably longer than the XI Air Corps had planned.

The situation was immediately apparent to the wing commander,* and as soon as he himself had landed, he reported it to the XI Air Corps by telephone. The line to his immediate superior, the Air Commander, XI Air Corps, was out of order, so he spoke directly to the Chief of the General Staff, XI Air Corps, and requested the necessary postponement of the take-off of the second wave."

General von Heyking went on to say that the wing would carry out its mission even without the support of the VIII Air Corps if necessary. In view of the postponement of their take-off, the units could not possibly regain their home bases before dusk after completing the run to Crete. This meant that they would all have to land at the airfields in the immediate vicinity of Athens.

273 - General R. von Heyking, op.cit., page 5 ff.

* Translator's Note: i.e. General von Heyking.

The Chief of the General Staff allegedly promised that a final decision would be made and the wing informed in plenty of time of what it was to do. This decision never reached the wing²⁷⁴.

There are also two basically differing reports, concerning the course of the landing operation itself during the second wave²⁷⁵.

"Reconnoitering the landing area near Iraklion during the approach flight, Colonel Bräuer noticed that previously landed paratroopers were lying in cover there, an unmistakable indication that the enemy fire in this sector was too heavy to make a paratrooper landing there particularly wise. In spite of the heavy antiaircraft artillery fire, Colonel Bräuer had the transport aircraft repeat their landing approach two or three times, until he was able to find an area which seemed to be free of enemy troops and suitable for a parachute jump"

The other report claims that the transport pilots, lacking experience in the landing of paratrooper forces and confused by the uniformity of the terrain, were unable to orient themselves properly and were thus incapable of finding the assigned landing points and releasing the paratroopers according to plan ...

274 - The author has discussed this particular aspect in detail with General der Fallschirmjaeger Schlemm, at that time Chief of Staff, XI Air Corps, and with Generalleutnant Trettner, Retired, former Operations Officer, XI Air Corps. General Schlemm stated categorically, "I never received such a telephone call!" General Trettner was more cautious: "It's possible that there may have been a call of that kind. I can't remember - we were all enormously overworked and at the end of our strength..."

275 - The reports were furnished the author by Lt. Colonel W. Hornung (from the air transport forces) and Colonel Boehmler, who served under Colonel Bräuer as battalion commander at Iraklion.

Towards noon of the first day of the invasion, the 3d Parachute Regiment reported from Chania that it was giving up its attack on the capital city. The XI Air Corps considered the possibility of diverting the 2d Parachute Regiment, assigned to Rethymnon, to the operational area of the 3d at Chania. There would hardly have been time to execute such a last-minute change in plans, however, and besides it would have resulted in even greater disorganization and confusion²⁷⁶.

When the situation at Malemes began to be critical (also towards noon), General Student dispatched Lt. Colonel Snowadzki, Headquarters Commandant, together with a small airfield staff, to set up a provisional take-off and landing system there²⁷⁷. "Circling over the airfield at low altitude, Snowadzki perceived that it was decorated with a pattern of swastikas. He landed without further ado, and taxied right into British artillery fire! His aircraft suffered minor damage." However, Snowadzki was able to take off again and return to his home base.

As the next link in this "chain of misfortunes", General Student received the alarming news that "enemy tanks, coming from the direction of Malemes, are attacking right across the airfield!"²⁷⁸ This might well have meant the end of Combat Group West on Crete.

But still worse was to come during the course of the invasion of Crete. On the afternoon of 20 May, each transport group - even each transport squadron - took off for the second wave as soon as it was ready, in an attempt to make up as much of the lost time as possible. By the time they appeared over the target

276 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 26.

277 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild".

278 - Storm Regiment, Radio Log, page 2, entry for 1620.

area, the situation was completely chaotic²⁷⁹. The landing of the paratroopers took place hours after the preparatory bombing attacks and without any sort of air cover whatsoever (see the diagram on the following page; the hours indicated are those prescribed by the original plan - in reality the second wave of transport aircraft reached the target area between 1515 and 1840²⁸⁰).

As a result, the enemy was given the opportunity to meet the oncoming units individually - and with great success - both in the air and on the ground. He had been warned by the bombing attack, and he had sufficient time to recover from it.

It is clear, then, that the second attack wave, assigned to capture Iraklion and Rethymnon, was doomed to failure from the very start by the difficulties encountered during the take-off from the Greek mainland!²⁸¹

The landing area of the 2d Parachute Regiment (under the command of Colonel Sturm), near Rethymnon, belonged to the operational sector assigned to the Combat Group Center. Colonel Sturm had divided his troops into three units for the accomplishment of their mission, the capture of the airfield and the city of Rethymnon. These units were the following:

- a. I Battalion, 2d Parachute Regiment, (except for two companies) and 2d Company, Parachute Machine-Gun Battalion (under the command of Major Kroh).

Mission: occupation of the airfield at Rethymnon.

- b. III Battalion, 2d Parachute Regiment, 2d Battery, Parachute Artillery Battalion, and one company from the Parachute Machine-Gun Battalion (under the command of Captain Wiedemann).

Mission: capture of the city of Rethymnon.

- c. Regiment staff with two companies, as a reserve force²⁸².

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- 279 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", No. 15, page 19 ff.
- 280 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 24. "Colonel Bräuner arrived with the Regiment staff at 1840..."
- 281 - This statement is taken from Generaloberst Student's own account (Memoirs, page 19, Paragraph III).
- 282 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 18.
-

Major Kroh's group jumped about two and one-half miles east of its assigned target area and landed on rocky, mountainous terrain - scattered over some five miles! The losses suffered as a result of landing injuries and sudden enemy artillery salvos were so high that the Battalion had to abandon all hope of carrying out its mission, the capture of the airfield (see the diagram on the following page; somewhat later, an air drop point was established east of the group's position in order to keep it supplied with ammunition and food in its desperate fight against the Greek partisans).

Most of Captain Wiedermann's group landed far wide of the appointed area, stumbled onto strongly fortified enemy positions, and was decimated²⁸³.

The Regiment Staff Group suffered the same fate.

And the hopelessness of the situation at Rethymnon could not even be reported to the Air Landing Corps in Athens; the radio equipment had all been destroyed.

Combat Group East.

The 1st Parachute Regiment, reinforced by the II Battalion, 2d Parachute Regiment, one company from the Parachute Machine-Gun Battalion, and one company from the Parachute Medical Battalion, and under the command of Colonel Bräuer was assigned the task of seizing the city and the airfield at Iraklion (see the diagram on the following page).

The approach flight was carried out, on the average, two and one-half hours later than planned²⁸⁴. Many of the transport aircraft ran into extremely heavy antiaircraft artillery and machine-gun fire and a number of them crashed in flames.

283 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 20.

284 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 23.

Because of the mountainous terrain, the paratrooper release altitude had to be increased to 650 ft.²⁸⁵. Many of the paratroopers were wounded or killed by enemy fire while still in the air.

One of the battalions (the II Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment) was given the mission of securing the airfield at Iraklion.

British light and medium tanks plowed right through the midst of the II Battalion while it was still in the process of landing; most of its units were destroyed within twenty minutes!

Twelve officers and 300 men from this Battalion alone were killed, and eight officers and more than 100 men seriously wounded²⁸⁶.

The transport aircraft carrying still another battalion (I Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment) were refused permission to take off due to the lateness of the hour.

The advent of darkness called a halt to the assault on the city of Iraklion by the III Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment. The invaders were stopped outside the city walls, which were manned by strong enemy forces.

The II Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment, had been forced to leave all but two companies in Greece due to a shortage in air transport space, and although these two companies managed to land in an area which was free of enemy troops, they were too weak to intervene effectively in an attack on either the city or the airfield²⁸⁷.

By the evening of the first day of operations, not a single one of Crete's three airfields was in German hands.

285 - The usual altitude was between 300 and 400 ft.

286 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, page 24.

287 - Standing out in the general confusion of the second wave are isolated instances of top-notch performance on the part of individual paratrooper officers, non-commissioned officers, and troop units. Let one example

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267 - (cont) suffice for all - the heroism of 1/Lt. Graf Bluecher, I Battalion, 1st Parachute Regiment, who managed to capture a large number of enemy artillery pieces with his very small force, and who was killed in action on Crete on the same day (21 May 1941) as two of his brothers. (Taken from the notice in the DAZ (Deutsche Allgemeine Zeitung) of 6 June 1941).

The developments we have just described brought the crisis in the ground fighting on Crete to its climax, a climax whose magnitude could not be appreciated by the individual paratrooper units since they were unable to communicate with one another.

The officers responsible for the over-all conduct of the operation, those from the Fourth Air Fleet (who had been so sure in the beginning that a single parachute regiment could capture Crete without difficulty) no less than their colleagues from the XI Air Corps, were seriously alarmed at the turn developments had taken. Everyone feared the worst.

General Jeschonnek relayed to General Student orders from the Reichsmarschall to the effect that General Student was not to fly to Crete, but was to remain in Athens and direct operations from there. (In this connection we should recall that General Student had been seriously wounded in the fighting near Rotterdam in 1940, after he had insisted upon flying to Waalhaven to be closer to the scene of action.)

2. 20 May 1941 (evening).

By the evening of the first day of operations, the invaders were forced to concede that the enemy forces were far stronger than had been anticipated at all four of the locations selected as paratrooper landing points.

"After the first day of fighting had taken heavy toll of their strength, it can be estimated that there were only 7,000 paratroopers left on the island by the evening of 20 May to face an enemy force of approximately 45,000.

Approximately 200 miles away from their home bases, these paratroopers were completely on their own; they had no alternative but to keep on fighting, without any hope of outside assistance. It was impossible to bring in reinforcements by air during the hours of

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darkness; not even urgently needed ammunition could be delivered..."²⁸⁸

288 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", No. 15, page 19.

Nevertheless, it was during the night of 20/21 May 1941 that the enemy lost the battle of Crete!²⁸⁹

General Freyberg, Commandant of the island of Crete, was expecting the main attack during the night, or rather during the early morning hours of 21 May, and assumed that the main landing force would be transported across the Aegean by boat. It was completely foreign to the tactical thinking of that time that an air landing force alone could carry out a decisive operation. Thus, General Freyberg was confident that the greater part of the German invasion force would arrive by ship and land at some point along the coast.

In spite of the strong numerical superiority of his own forces, which could be deployed at will during the night without the risk of Luftwaffe interference, General Freyberg did not dare to expel the weak and exhausted German paratrooper units from the island - something which he could have accomplished easily by a concentrated offensive against them. The fact that the British Alexandria fleet, heavily armed, spent the night patrolling the waters north of Crete on the alert for German landing craft is ample proof that top-level British commanders were of the same opinion as General Freyberg.

The British view, in summary, called for the German main landing force to attack from the sea. As a result every inch of coastline area was occupied by the enemy - and continued to be occupied by the enemy (see the maps on the following pages). It was this mistaken evaluation of the situation which cost the British an otherwise certain victory on Crete. British leaders were unwilling to use any of the four fresh battalions stationed east of Malemes to meet the "main German invasion from the sea"

289 - This statement reflects the opinion of the author.

in a concentrated counterattack on the paratroopers storming the airfield at Malemes²⁹⁰.

For the German leaders, the time had come either to give up Crete or to risk everything in one bold maneuver²⁹¹. In order to carry out the planned landing of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, at least one airfield in Crete would have to be securely in German hands - and that as soon as possible. "Despite a number of doubts and reservations"²⁹², the choice fell upon the airfield at Malemes.

For one thing, the Malemes field was closest to the take-off area in Greece, and besides, the German offensive had pushed farthest at Malemes. True enough, the landing surface at Malemes was substantially smaller than that at Iraklion. The British had utilized Malemes only as a fighter base. The plan to use this airfield as the base for a large-scale air landing operation, as a base at which thousands of airborne troops would be landing - not to mention supplies for the entire invasion force - was a classic example of the practice of putting all one's eggs in one basket.

Chania was still in enemy hands; the attack on Suda Bay had come to a standstill.

No news whatsoever had been received from Rethymmon.

An attempt was to be made to assemble the paratrooper forces at Iraklion into a concentrated task force on 21 May to take the airfield by means of an all-out attack. There was no doubt that the fighting would be extremely heavy in this sector.

During the night of 20/21 May the engine-driven sailboats, which had been delayed by strong headwinds²⁹³, finally arrived at Melos. There they waited for further instructions as to when and at what

290 - Generaloberst Student, special issue of "Der deutsche Fallschirmjaeger", page 2, column 3.

- 291 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", page 19.
 - 292 - Generaloberst Student, loc.cit., paragraph IV.
 - 293 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 20, paragraph 5.
-

point on the northern coast of the island they were to land.

The orders issued by the Fourth Air Fleet for the continuation of operations on 21 May 1941 contained the following specific assignments²⁹⁴:

1. XI Air Corps

- a. Transport of sufficient reinforcements to the Combat Group West to assure the latter's ability to seize the airfield at Malemes. This operational area was to be the point of main effort.
- b. As soon as the airfield had been seized and secured against further enemy harassment, the landing of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division was to be started without delay.
- c. Reinforced by the Mountain Infantry troops, Combat Group West was to launch an attack on Chania and to establish contact with the Combat Group Center. Subsequently, it was to capture Suda Bay in order to establish a landing point for the ships transporting heavy weapons.
- d. The Fourth Air Fleet appointed Generalleutnant Ringel, together with the staff of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, to take charge of both Combat Group West and Combat Group Center. He was to fly to Malemes with the first of the Mountain Infantry battalions on 21 May 1941.

2. VIII Air Corps

- a. The VIII Air Corps was to furnish air cover for the landings in the Malemes and Chania areas by holding down enemy antiaircraft artillery fire and by supporting the operations of the paratroopers already on the ground. The point of main emphasis was to be the area assigned to the Combat Group West.

294 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 21.

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- b. VIII Air Corps units were to provide air support for the assaults on Chania and Suda Bay.
 - c. VIII Air Corps reconnaissance aircraft were to keep the waters around Crete under surveillance and to guide alerted fighter aircraft to the attack on any identified enemy naval forces.
3. Office of the Admiral (Southeast)

This agency was to do everything in its power to make sure that the first band of motor-driven sailboats (carrying heavy weapons, ammunition, and troops) landed near Malemes before dusk on 21 May 1941.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

The airfield at Malemes, showing transport
aircraft (Ju-52's) damaged by enemy fire.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Generalleutnant Ringel called Malemes
airfield the "gates to Hell".

Above: Newly arrived Mountain Infantry
troops.

Below: Malemes airfield, with the coastal
highway in the foreground.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Parachute forces on Crete. Note the terrain - highly favorable to a defending force by virtue of the plentiful cover it offered -, the highly unsuitable clothing (at a temperature of over 86° F in the shade), weapons and equipment, as well as the swastika flag being used as an aircraft orientation marker.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

On the island of Crete donkeys were
used to transport heavy weapons and
equipment, as well as ~~for~~ paratroopers
slightly wounded during the fighting
or injured in landing.

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PHOTOGRAPH

The radio station at Malemes.

The olive groves provided both
shade and cover.

Radio was the only practical method of communication on the island. The danger of sabotage by guerrilla fighters was too great to permit the laying of telephone cables or the maintenance of a courier service. As the photograph indicates, the parachutes could be utilized as tents.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: The city of Iraklion

Below: The airfield at Iraklion

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: The take-off from the Greek mainland, showing the clouds of dust stirred up by each aircraft.

Below: Bombardment of an enemy position in the vicinity of Chania.

3. 21 May 1941 (morning and afternoon)

20/21 May 1941 was a "night of decision"²⁹⁵ in the battle of Crete. The German leaders had been unable to find out anything regarding the deployment of enemy troops during the night; nor could they be certain that no enemy reinforcements had landed in Suda Bay. And it was out of the question to expect the parachute forces landed during the day to keep watch on the harbors along the southern coast. It was a piece of luck for the invaders that the southern ports were too ill-equipped to permit the landing of troops to strengthen the defenders' force.

The paratrooper forces, somewhat the worse for wear, took advantage of the hours of darkness to assemble and organize their scattered elements. They remained on the alert, expecting momentarily to be attacked by the enemy. Conferences were held to determine the offensive and defensive tactics to be put into use the next day; everything possible was done to care for the countless numbers of wounded, the toll of the first day's fighting²⁹⁶.

One of the reasons for selecting the Malemes area as the point of main effort was the fact that a smoothly functioning radio station had already been established thereby the signal communications officer of the Storm Regiment and his staff. And this assured the maintenance of contact between Malemes and the Air Landing Corps headquarters in Athens²⁹⁷.

According to the original plans, the Air Landing Corps was to keep the individual combat groups supplied with ammunition. Since there were not enough supply containers available, all supplies had to be landed rather than air-dropped at Malemes.

295 - This phrase occurs in nearly all of General Student's writings, eg. in his Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", page 19, column 2.

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- 296 - The author has had at his disposal the diary of the Corps medical officer, containing lists and reports on all the wounded (some of them merely jotted down on scraps of paper). The diary is a deeply moving document, a tribute to the tireless effort and spirit of self-sacrifice demonstrated by the medical personnel who had landed with the paratroopers.
- 297 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 1: "... despite the fact that most of the signal equipment had been lost ..."
-

Combat Group West

In conjunction with the landing of the urgently needed ammunition supplies for the Combat Group in the early morning hours of 21 May 1941, Captain Kleye (from the staff of the XI Air Corps²⁹⁸) undertook a reconnaissance mission to determine landing conditions at the Malemes airfield. "Landing at Malemes and taking off again immediately, he was subjected to heavy infantry fire..." He also drew some artillery fire. It was extremely difficult to combat the enemy artillery positions, for they nearly always cut their fire at the approach of an aircraft.

Captain Kleye's report persuaded the Air Landing Corps to postpone the landing of a Mountain Infantry battalion for a bit. However, the air landing was to be carried through at all costs on 21 May.

In order to bring reinforcements to the Storm Regiment at Malemes with the least possible delay, the XI Air Corps ordered the parachute landing of two combat groups, one to the east and the other to the west of the airfield (see the sketch on the following page).

a. In the mistaken assumption that the area lying between Platanias and Pyrgos was free of enemy troops, the Corps ordered the landing of the 5th and 6th Companies, 2d Parachute Regiment, under the command of 1/Lt. Naegele, behind the enemy lines. Their mission was to drive forward against the enemy stronghold at Malemes from the east and to destroy it.

b. During the early afternoon, two and one-half companies made up primarily of antitank troops were dropped by parachute west of the airfield at Malemes. The landing was preceded by a concentrated

298 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 1, paragraph II.

air attack by the VIII Air Corps²⁹⁹.

c. Command of the Combat Group West was assigned to Colonel Ramcke³⁰⁰, who landed west of Malemes by parachute during the afternoon.

In the meantime the Storm Regiment (or rather what was left of it) had reorganized itself into two groups. The first, under Gericke, pushed forward along the coastal highway to attack the airfield, while the second, under Stentzler, undertook to subdue the enemy forces on Hill 107. After a highly eventful struggle, fraught with crises on both sides, the Storm Regiment succeeded in accomplishing both objectives³⁰¹.

The uncertainty of the over-all situation, the often complicated channels of command and the frequently arbitrary issuance of orders, the indescribable thirst induced by the heat and dust - all of these factors placed the troops under a tremendous strain. The German victory at Malemes would not have been possible without the effective support of the VIII Air Corps and the energy and initiative of individual leaders, among both the commissioned and non-commissioned officers.

The crisis occurring during the afternoon of 21 May 1941 was made up of several clearly recognizable phases:

a. The reinforcements which landed by parachute east of Malemes found themselves in territory patrolled by strong enemy forces. They were almost completely destroyed by enemy armored units.

299 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, pages 2 and 3.

300 - Colonel Rancke was the commander of the Parachute Replacement Units (Fallschirm-Ersatzeinheiten) and Training Schools.

301 - For detailed descriptions of this eventful and extremely costly struggle for possession of the airfield at Malemes and the hills lying to the south of it, the reader is referred to the following sources: Gericke, Von Malemes Bis Chania (From Malemes to Chania), and Altkirar von Hove, Achtung Fallschirmjaeger (Watch Out, Paratroopers).

b. Although the Gericke group was able to clear the runway and its immediate vicinity of enemy troops, the British still could keep the airfield under machine-gun and artillery fire and thus jeopardize the landing of German aircraft.

c. Almost simultaneously, the Air Landing Corps headquarters in Athens was deluged by alarming reports from the Combat Group West:

"The New Zealanders are attacking the airfield with the support of strong armored units. We have no more antitank ammunition. An enemy force of regiment strength is moving up from Palaiochora in the south to attack Malemes!"³⁰²

All the available forces from the VIII Air Corps were dispatched immediately to meet the approaching enemy force with tireless air attacks, but it proved extremely difficult to distinguish friend from foe in the featureless terrain. The enemy troops also made use of captured swastika flags toward off bombardment. The losses resulting from the difficulty of clear identification were probably unavoidable, but at the same time they were most painfully felt³⁰³.

Beginning at 1600 on 21 May 1941, a mountain infantry battalion made up of units from the 100th and the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiments and under the command of Colonel Utz, was landed at the Malemes airfield³⁰⁴.

302 - Storm Regiment, Radio Log, page 4, and XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 5. The report that a strong enemy force was approaching from the south was not accurate. It was based apparently on false observations. The case was never satisfactorily clarified (XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 6).

303 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, pages 8 and 9. The following is quoted: "The units were subjected to attack by their own Do-17 units, and suffered serious losses as a result." The unit under the author's command on Crete was the victim of a low-altitude raid by German twin-engine fighters (Me-110's), with their horrifying pictures of sharks and sirens on the wings. The sight and sound of them alone was enough to demoralize the troops. The attack killed eight men and wounded a number of others. The report is contained in the Storm Regiment, Radio Log, page 5.

304 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 5.

The landing was carried out with skill and determination on the part of the transport pilots from the 3d Special Duty Bomber Wing (Colonel Buchholz) in spite of heavy enemy artillery fire. A large number of Ju-52's remained behind on the field, damaged by enemy fire or gutted by flames (see the photographs on page 144). Thanks to the presence of mind and skill of the pilots, the losses were kept relatively low.

With the capture of the airfield at Malemes, the battle of Crete was already won³⁰⁵. By the evening of 21 May, the crisis seemed to be over.

Combat Group Center

"There was no appreciable change in the situation faced by Combat Group Center on 21 May 1941".³⁰⁶ Contrary to expectation, the British did not attack in the vicinity of Chania. The 3d Parachute Regiment made several attempts to seize the hills around Galatas, but was turned back by strong enemy defenses. The Combat Group Center was so weakened by the losses it had sustained and by the enervating climate that it could do no more than hold on to its original positions and - in doing so - to tie down a number of enemy troops.

The paratrooper force at Rethymnon (approximately a battalion in strength) was kept busy dodging repeated attacks by an enemy force far superior in number. There was no possibility of their being able to seize the airfield or the city.

305 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", page 19.

306 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 7.

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PHOTOGRAPH

The area of operations at Rethymnon was so narrowly limited that supply was a definite problem. In order to solve the problem, the XI Air Corps set up a supply drop point some five miles from the airfield (see the photograph above; the supply containers are clearly recognizable at the left). The supply point, under the command of 1/Lt von Roon, was subjected to continual harrassment by Greek guerrilla fighters.

Combat Group East

On 21 May, the forces of Combat Group East were still too widely dispersed to be able to carry out an effective assault on the airfield or the city of Iraklion. All attempts to reassemble the paratroopers had been unsuccessful.

A concerted drive to seize the city, exploiting a previous air attack by the VIII Air Corps, gained ground in the beginning but was soon forced to a standstill by the lack of heavy weapons. The harbor fortifications - an ancient Venetian fort - could not be taken with light infantry weapons.

The lack of cover around the airfield itself made further attack impossible without strong artillery support. Thus there was little that the Combat Group East could do except to tie down the enemy units in the area and to prevent the enemy from using the airfield³⁰⁷.

4. 21 May 1941 (evening)

The forces landed (by parachute and by aircraft) at Malemes seemed strong enough to hold the airfield and to guarantee the successful establishment of an airlift between Greece and Crete (planned for 22 May 1941).

If the German forces were to prevail, they would have to be able to count on the feasibility of landing additional mountain infantry troops and heavy weapons (especially antitank guns)^{at}/at least this one airfield on the island.

Colonel Ramcke, officially designated successor to General Meindl (who had been wounded) as commander at Malemes, arrived in the area of operations.

General Meindl, (see the photograph on the following page), together with the majority of the seriously wounded personnel, had been taken back to Athens in one of the returning transport aircraft.

However, Combat Group West still lacked a uniform chain of command uniting the paratroopers and the Mountain Infantry troops under a single authority not belonging directly to either group.

307 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part II, B, page 13.

PHOTOGRAPH

The Combat Groups Center and East were soon forced to switch to defensive operations, by means of which they struggled to hold the ground they had already won, to keep the enemy from utilizing the airfields at Rethymnon and Iraklion, and to block the main highway along the coast.

The elimination of any island-based enemy air activity was sufficient to assure the Luftwaffe air supremacy over Crete³⁰⁸.

On the basis of their reconnaissance reports, the German operational planners had no choice but to assume that the majority of the Alexandria fleet, reinforced by elements from the Gibraltar fleet, was under way. Since the available German naval forces were

308 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 28, paragraph 5.

too weak, the Luftwaffe was given the task of single-handedly containing the British fleet to the extent necessary to permit the transport of troops, equipment, and supplies over the Aegean to Crete³⁰⁹.

The situation at Iraklion was so uncertain that it was deemed wiser to recall the fleet of boats which was to land near Combat Group East. The fleet headed for Malemes was ordered to proceed alone.

Section 4 - The Fate of the Ocean Transport Groups³¹⁰.

The two groups of engine-powered sailboats set out on schedule at dawn on 20 May 1941. The Malemes group, carrying the reinforced

309 - The fact that the Greater German Broadcasting Station (Grossdeutscher Rundfunk) still had made no mention of the operations on Crete by 21 May 1941 reflects the attitude of top-level German command - on 21 May they were by no means certain of ultimate victory on Crete! It was not until the fifth day of operations (24 May 1941 at 1700) that the Wehrmacht High Command released a special bulletin which revealed what was taking place for the first time. The London Times of 21 May 1941 predicts a British victory on Crete and continues, "The outcome in Crete will decide more than mere strategic advantage ... a German defeat on Crete would be serious and a frightful blow to German prestige." In this connection, the reader is also referred to Appendix 7, which deals with the impressions of members of the enemy force on Crete.

310 - There are a number of good reports on these ocean transport missions, including those by the Navy, the Luftwaffe, and the Mountain Infantry forces. The best source remains the original war diary of the Admiral (Southeast) (Admiral Schuster). As far as the role of the Luftwaffe is concerned, and particularly the "naval air battle" waged by the VIII Air Corps, the author has based his description on the Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, and on the diaries of General von Richthofen. General Ringel, op.cit., pages 100 - 121, deals in great and highly dramatic detail with the journey of the Mountain Infantry forces. No attempt has been made to reproduce his treatment of the matter fully. General A. Wittmann, writing in the magazine "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry), No. 2, 1954, pages 24 - 51, presents an excellent summary. Winston Churchill, op.cit., pages 287 and 288, deals with the fate of the "chiques", the small sailboats. The British losses he gives for the battle between the Luftwaffe and the Royal Navy do not agree with those cited by the VIII Air Corps and

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310 - (cont) other German sources. Even today one reads terribly exaggerated accounts of German losses (tenfold! !). It was not 4000 mountain infantry troops who died in the Aegean (Churchill, op.cit., page 287), but exactly 297 men, including the commander of the III Battalion, 100th Mountain Infantry Regiment.

III Battalion, 100th Mountain Infantry Regiment, was under the command of Lt. Colonel Ehal from the Piraeus, while the Iraklion group, bearing the reinforced II Battalion, 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, was entrusted to Major Treck from Chalkis. The total number of troops on board these small transport vessels is given as 2,300³¹¹.

As far as Melos the progress of the two groups, each one accompanied by an Italian torpedo boat and two mine-sweeper groups, was smoothly uneventful apart from the fact that the convoy speed had to be decreased to as little as two or three nautical miles per hour because of bad weather³¹².

By the evening of the first day of operations, the transport groups, waiting at Melos for further instructions, were forced to the conclusion that the invasion of Crete was not going to be completed in the short time originally anticipated and that, consequently, their own landing could not possibly be carried out on schedule (i.e. that same day).

On 21 May the Admiral (Southeast) reported to the XI Air Corps that Malemes was safely in German hands, and that a stretch of coast suitable for landing boats was also free of enemy forces. And with this, the first prerequisites for a landing were fulfilled³¹³. The Malemes group set out from Melos.

In accordance with previously made arrangements, at 0900 the group was ordered to stop and - soon thereafter - to reverse course, since it had not been definitely determined that the waters ahead were free of enemy ships.

Approximately one and one-half hours later, aerial reconnaissance forces reported that

311 - Diary of the Admiral Southeast, page 4.

312 - Specifically, strong headwinds!

313 - Diary of the Admiral Southeast, page 5.

the waters north of Crete were free of enemy forces. Hereupon the group was ordered to continue on its way.

The reasoning behind this last order was based on the following considerations³¹⁴:

a. According to weather forecasts, winds from the north and northwest were expected - in other words, tailwinds which might well increase the convoy speed to five or six nautical miles per hour. This meant that the group could reach Malemes before nightfall. In the mistaken assumption that this wind was already coming from north or northwest, German leaders reasoned that the group could not have moved very far north during the short time which had elapsed after the "reverse course" order. (As it turned out, during this time there was a strong wind from the southwest, which had pushed the group farther north than would otherwise have been the case.)

b. Operational planners were of the opinion that a drastic change in the orders issued to the transport fleet could well jeopardize the success of the operation.

Accordingly, the Admiral(Southeast) asked the operation leaders for a direct answer to the question as to whether it was absolutely necessary to assume the additional risk inherent in the unfavorable situation of the moment, or whether the operation, i.e. the progress of the naval group, could not be postponed by 24 hours.

Because of the inadequacy of signal communications, it was clear from the beginning that some of the boats would not receive the messages to reverse course and then to resume their journey to the original destination.

The operation leaders determined that the situation demanded that the transport vessels proceed. Accordingly, the destroyer "Lupo" was ordered to head for Malemes with its contingent of ships, moving at top speed and not stopping to wait for stragglers.

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314 - Office of the Admiral(Southeast), classified report on Operation MERKUR,
No. 8689, dated 16 June 1941.

The commanders of the operation were certain that the Malemes group would reach Cape Spatha - and thus the protective proximity of the coastline - by about 2100. According to the evening reports of the aerial reconnaissance forces, the British naval forces in the area could not be expected to reach the Cape before 2200. With a bit of luck, then, the landing could succeed³¹⁵.

At 2334 the "Lupo" radioed that the sixteen small boats making up the Malemes group had been stopped by British cruisers and destroyers and that the group was in danger of being annihilated.

The forenoon of 22 May 1941 revealed the surprising intelligence³¹⁶ that the enemy, in spite of continual activity on the part of the German Luftwaffe and the consequent risk of heavy losses, was combing the waters between Crete and Melos in search of reported transport vessels. It seemed apparent that the British were determined to hold Crete, even if it meant employing all of their naval forces.

In the face of this determination, German leaders concluded that there was little to be gained by sending out any more motor-powered sailing vessels as transport ships. Another way would have to be found to bring the most urgently needed supplies to the island³¹⁷.

While the two sailboat groups, both of which had been ordered to return to the Piraeus, were still at sea, the decision was taken

315 - Handwritten marginal note on the original, in the records of the Naval Command Headquarters (Seekriegsleitung): "This timing is extremely unrealistic."

316 - Another marginal note on the original: "... hardly surprising! The effects of the Luftwaffe attacks will take some time to make themselves felt."

317 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, Diary, page 33: "General von Richthofen insists that the sailboats be ordered to proceed inasmuch as the reinforcements were badly needed on Crete and the British naval forces had withdrawn in defeat. However, the shock occasioned by the destruction of the first group was so great that the entire operation was called off - most unfortunately. . ."

to bring the most important equipment (including tanks) to Crete by individual transport ship. In preparation, work was begun on a landing stage at Castelli (on the northwestern part of the island).

In summary, the report of the Admiral (Southeast) has the following comment to make³¹⁸: "... only by means of close and constant coordination between the Fourth Air Fleet and the units subordinated to it and the command headquarters of the Twelfth Army, was it possible to overcome the enormous difficulties described.

Close coordination at command level, coupled with mutual understanding and effective cooperation at the operational level, were the prerequisites for the successes achieved and for the rapid compensation of the failures suffered.

The need for an adequate period of preparation for future missions of this type cannot be overemphasized."³¹⁹

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The Air Naval Battle over the Aegean and the Fate of the Second Ocean Transport Group.

In the Diary of General von Richthofen, the battle of the VIII Air Corps against the British naval forces is described as follows³²⁰:

318 - Report of the Admiral (Southeast), page 13, paragraph 2.

319 - Handwritten marginal note contributed by Admiral K. Fricke, Chief of Staff, Naval Command Headquarters: "Doubtful! The advantage of better preparation would be cancelled out by the disadvantage of stronger enemy defenses. Preservation of the element of surprise precludes systematic preparation of the sort envisioned by the Admiral (Southeast). The Admiral (Southeast) ought to have obeyed the instruction of the Naval Command Headquarters to permit the departure of the transport ships only after it had been determined that the waters were free of enemy naval forces.

In the opinion of the Naval Command Headquarters, the delay necessitated by "preparing for Operation MERKUR proved to be more of a hindrance than a help inasmuch as the element of surprise had to be sacrificed".

320 - General von Richthofen's description (pages 29 and 30 of his Diary) is so vivid - although not entirely free of inaccuracies - that the author has elected to quote it in its entirety.

"22 May 1941 - Since 0500 we have been receiving reports to the effect that British cruisers and destroyers are patrolling the waters near Iraklion, Crete, as well as near Melos and Cythera.

The first group of transport boats, with more than 2,000 troops on board³²¹, was surrounded and destroyed by the British force during the night³²². The Italian submarine³²³ accompanying the group succeeded in sinking one British cruiser, but that was all. The British force withdrew towards the west.

There was a second British force, composed of four cruisers and three destroyers, lying in wait off the coast of Iraklion. At dawn this force set out at full speed for Melos, approaching the island at about 1000.

On the basis of erroneous reports, our second transport group was ordered to depart from Melos in the morning. Five of our sailboats were attacked by the British force; the rest were able to escape from the enemy behind a smoke screen thrown up by the Italian escort ship³²⁴.

Since the German dive bomber forces had been sent up that morning against the enemy western squadron (which was stationed just south of the Peloponnesus and threatened to destroy our dive bombers at the Malaïos airfield right near the sea), there were no dive bombers available to head off the British naval force proceeding to Melos. Even the Ju-88's and He-111's had been committed against the western squadron. As a result, the

321 - This figure is inaccurate. Each transport group was capable of moving one battalion.

322 - "Destroyed" is hardly appropriate; see page 159 of the present study for the actual losses sustained (Footnote 310).

323 - This was not an Italian submarine (U-Boot), but a torpedo boat (T-Boat).

324 - The escort ship was the Italian torpedo Boat "Sagittario".

Do-17 wing is the only one available. As the boats burst into flame, the Do-17's drop their first bombs. We gave the boats up for lost, but the enemy suddenly reversed course and headed west to Cythera. Our second landing (near Iraklion) has also been prevented but this time at least we didn't lose all the boats. Our paratroopers on Crete are waiting in vain for reinforcements.

In the meantime the dive bombers are ready to take off again and are ordered up against the enemy naval force bound for Cythera. All available aircraft are mobilized for action - single-engine fighters, with and without bombs, twin-engine fighters, Ju-87's, He-111's, Ju-88's, and Do-17's. The British ships are hit again and again. They burst into flames and sink. Others approach to pick up the survivors and are themselves hit by the bombs. The British call for help, and the main British fleet dispatches another cruiser group to reinforce them.

The ships had been under constant bombardment from the air since daybreak. Now they were beginning to run out of antiaircraft ammunition. The cruisers making up the newly-arrived relief group are also caught in the hail of bombs. The battle is a seething chaos of ships zigzagging and turning at full speed, on fire, sinking, or dragging themselves along, listing to one side and leaving a trail of oil on the water, with no goal but to escape from this Hell.

... In the late afternoon the British cease fire, presumably because they have no more ammunition. Slowly and wearily they withdraw towards Alexandria. The outcome is unmistakable. I have the feeling the we have won a great and decisive victory."³²⁵

It was by no means certain, however, that the British fleet

325 - See pages 193 a and 193 b (diagrams) of the present study, which indicate British losses, as given by British sources (eg. D.M. Davin, Crete, page 450ff)

considered itself beaten³²⁶. It had suffered considerable damage, to be sure, and was forced to keep out of the way of the Luftwaffe during the day. It was assumed that the British would augment the force patrolling the waters north of Crete during the following night.

It soon became apparent that the VIII Air Corps did not have sufficient personnel at its disposal to permit it to fulfill all the various combat missions assigned to it. Once the battle of the "Luftwaffe against the Royal Navy in a limited area"³²⁷ got under way, the VIII Air Corps had no alternative but to relegate its other missions - among them the furnishing of air support for the ground forces on Crete, to the background³²⁸.

Through the intervention of the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff, who happened to be visiting Fourth Air Fleet Headquarters, two groups from the X Air Corps (III Group, 30th Bomber Wing, and I Group, 1st Dive-Bomber Wing) were ordered to reinforce the VIII Air Corps.

326 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 31, paragraph III.

327 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 31, paragraph III, 4.

328 - Thus General von Richthofen was very much mistaken when he complained (on 22 May 1941) that "...the ground troops, getting stronger and stronger, have so far failed to make any decisive move - they're simply sitting around and doing nothing. Crete is positively dead!" (Diary, page 31). In the recollection of the author, the only people "sitting around" were the crews of the destroyed or badly damaged aircraft. However, due to the personal influence enjoyed by General von Richthofen, remarks such as the above, however remotely they might agree with the actual facts, found their way to top-ranking Wehrmacht circles, where they did much to injure the reputation of the newly-established parachute forces (This is not, of course, subject to proof; it represents the author's opinion).

General von Richthofen's diaries exaggerate the role played by his own VIII Air Corps. On pages 32 and 33, for example, he lists enemy losses for a single day, 22 May 1941, as six cruisers and three destroyers - "definitely sunk". He continues, "At last we have proved that no enemy fleet can keep afloat in an area controlled by the Luftwaffe." Significantly, he makes no distinction between day and night control. The Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 31, reports that "three cruisers or destroyers

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328 - (cont) were sunk" on 22 May 1941. According to Churchill, op.cit.,
Volume III, the following ships were actually sunk: the cruiser
"Gloucester", the cruiser "Fiji", and the destroyer "Greyhound".

The second transport group (the one which was to land in the vicinity of Iraklion) was saved from destruction by the Italian torpedo boat assigned to escort it (the "Sagittario"). The warning did not come through until 0800 on 22 May 1941³²⁹. Reversing course immediately upon receipt of the order, the group ran into a British naval force. Thanks to the prompt action of the "Sagittario", the transport boats were able to escape from the enemy behind a rapidly created smoke screen. The majority of the vessels managed to get back to Melos unharmed. The Italian forces manning the torpedo boat had acted with dispatch and tactical ingenuity to protect the transport boats entrusted to their care.

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The attempt to land reinforcements on Crete by boat during the first days of the operation was a failure. The reservations which the Naval Command Headquarters had expressed prior to the operation³³⁰ had been fully substantiated. We have no choice but to condemn as a serious mistake the decision to begin the first ocean transport runs at a time when the presence of strong enemy naval forces in the Aegean was still being reported by the aerial reconnaissance forces. The losses incurred thereby could have been avoided.

329 - Office of the Admiral (Southeast), No. 830/41, classified, dated 23 May 1941 (addressed to the Naval Command Headquarters), page 2, paragraph III: "Radio communication to the Italian escort destroyers had to be routed through the Italian station attached to the office of the Admiral (Southeast). There had not been time to equip the individual transport boats with radio facilities."

330 - See Footnote 319, page 163 of the present study - operations should not have been begun until the military situation at sea had been brought under firm control.

Royal Navy spokesmen characterize 22 May 1941 as "... the most costly day for the fleet, which had three ships sunk and six damaged".³³¹ The losses sustained by the VIII Air Corps, on the other hand, were satisfactorily minor, the British fleet reporting two German aircraft definitely downed, six probably downed, and three damaged.

The sea rescue squadron turned in a magnificent performance in helping to save countless hundreds of troops, both friendly and enemy, from death by drowning.³³²

The only troop unit to be transported to Crete by sea³³³ during the first stage of the fighting was a small armored force with two tanks of the Panzer III type. It landed in the bay of Kastelli, on the northwestern coast of the island, on 25 April 1941 (sic).

Section 5 - The Assumption of Command at the Point of Main Effort by General

Ringel and the Operations of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division.

The third day of operations on Crete, 22 May 1941, came to an end without the hoped-for gain in territory at any one of the four landing points.

The airfield at Malemes, the

331 - Colonel W. Gaul, Retired, "Operation MERKUR", Volume 4, 1951, of the magazine "Europäische Sicherheit" (European Security), Verlag Mittler + Sohn, Darmstadt, page 11.

332 - H. Horbach, "Argonautenfahrt Reichenhaller Gebirgsjaeger" (The Journey of the Mountain Infantry Troops from Reichenhall), in volume 2, 1954, of the magazine "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry). On page 41, the following appears: "... They haven't forgotten us; life rafts are dropped by air ... and there is place for all of us in them. Then the sea rescue aircraft will pick us up and by evening we'll be in Athens.

Three of our comrades died on board the rafts (!). All the rest of us, including the wounded, managed to hold out until we were rescued."

334 - Generaloberst Student, "Sonderbericht Kreta" (Special Report on Crete), page 3, column 2.

only real potential gap in the anti-invasion defenses of the island, was still under British artillery fire. Despite intensive efforts, the VIII Air Corps was unable to eliminate the sources of this fire³³⁵. A commando unit from the XI Air Corps, equipped with captured enemy tanks, had to be on hand to clear the landing strips of the flaming wreckage congesting them.

The enemy was firmly convinced that the Germans would be unable to take the island using the "impossible" airfield at Malemes as a base of operations³³⁶. Churchill himself replied to the report of the commander in chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, stating that the expenses of maintaining the Fleet were too high to permit its being risked in an attack on Crete³³⁷.

"If it were merely a matter of a duel between the Mediterranean Fleet and the German Luftwaffe, the limitations

335 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 1; Storm Regiment Radio Log, page 7, reports the following radio message, received at 0745 on 22 May 1941: "XI Air Corps to Storm Regiment; The heavy artillery position two and one-half miles east of the airfield is being combatted (author's note: without success) by twin-engine fighter aircraft. There are neither dive-bomber nor single-engine fighter aircraft available". The absence of forces from the VIII Air Corps, a result of the unexpectedly violent sea-air battle, was a decided disadvantage as far as the scheduled course of Operation MERKUR was concerned. If the enemy artillery at Malemes airfield could have been eliminated in time, the loss of a hundred or more transport aircraft might have been prevented.

336 - W. Hornung, "Lufttransportversorgung der Insel Kreta" (Air Supply Operations to the Island of Crete), 26 October 1954, describes the "deficiencies of the Malemes airfield" as follows: "... narrow and uneven, furrowed by grenades, it was more like a plowed field than a landing strip. Every time an aircraft landed, it sent up a cloud of fine red dust ..."

337 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 292.

you suggest in the movement of the Fleet might be justified as necessary.

Under the present circumstances, however, we also have the battle of Crete to consider! If the Fleet can manage to stave off the ocean transport and landing of enemy reinforcements and supplies until the invasion force has been brought under control by our Army, then the Army may be able to take over the task of coping with attacks from the sea.

Thus, it is of vital importance that the Fleet prevent the landing of any enemy expeditions on the island within the next few days, even though such action may mean further losses for the Fleet ..."

From the above it is apparent that the enemy still believed, on the third day of operations, that the main invasion force would land from the sea. The action - or rather lack of action - of the island's military commander, General Freyberg, was also indicative of this belief, for he refused to send his numerically superior reserves into combat against the relatively weak German air landing groups, obviously holding them back for the anticipated landings from the sea.

The transport aircraft continued to land German troops; on 22 May 1941 two Mountain Infantry battalions and one Mountain Infantry Engineer battalion³³⁸ were brought to the island. But the losses inflicted on the air transport force were becoming unbearably high. The operational strength of the Ju-52 units amounted to 493 aircraft on 20 May 1941 - by

338 - More troops than had been loaded onto all the ships from the two motor-driven sailboat squadrons!

23 May 1941 it had sunk to 273 Ju-52's³³⁹. In other words, more than half of the original force had been put out of action, meaning that the surviving machines and crews were forced to assume twice as many assignments and twice as much responsibility³⁴⁰. Each transport aircraft was required to fly two missions per day from the Greek mainland to the island of Crete. This was a tremendous feat in view of the difficulties involved, and one deserving of the very highest praise³⁴¹.

On the evening of 22 May 1941, Generalleutnant Ringel, Commander of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division, landed at Malemes with his divisional staff and assumed command of the operations there³⁴². In compliance with his orders, the units were reorganized.

Generalleutnant Ringel's first objective was to clear the western portion of the island of enemy troops, in order to secure the airfield for the use of the invaders.

The Mountain Infantry Engineer Battalion advanced as far as Kastelli (see the map on the following page), in spite of the stubborn resistance offered by civilian volunteer fighters and

339 - W. Hornung, study dated 29 March 1955, Appendix 6, page 40. Not all of these, of course, were total losses; some of the aircraft included in this statistic sustained only minor damages, which could be repaired within a few weeks.

340 - The troops which, according to General von Richthofen's reports, "sat around doing nothing", were made up primarily of the crews whose aircraft had been destroyed or damaged (based on the author's personal observations).

341 - Generaloberst Student, on page 22, column 2 of his Memoirs in the magazine "Weltbild", describes the problems posed by the Malemes airfield as follows: "The airfield at Malemes was a landing strip the shape of a towel approximately 2000 ft. long. It had to be handled like a raw egg, which meant that only one aircraft could land or take-off at a time. As a result, it took about four hours to land a single battalion! Under such conditions as these, it was only by extremely strict discipline that the airfield commandant (Lt.Col. Snowadzki, from the staff of the XI Air Corps) was able to implement the air traffic restrictions

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341 (cont) which had been imposed." In this connection, the reader is also referred to Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 34, paragraph I, 1.
342 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 33, paragraph 4.

military snipers waiting in ambush³⁴³.

The harbor of Palaiochora, on the southern coast of the island, was captured by the 55th Motorcycle Rifle Battalion (Kradshuetzenbataillon 55) in the face of similarly stubborn resistance.

These two operations put an effective end to the threat of enemy attack on the Malemes airfield from the west or the south³⁴⁴.

At Generalleutnant Ringel's behest, two groups were formed to push forward to the east, via Chania, to Suda Bay:

- a) the first group, consisting of mountain infantry troops under the command of Colonel Utz, was to cross the mountains towards the south;
- b) the second, made up of the reassembled paratroopers from the Storm Regiment and the reinforcement units landed at Malemes under Colonel Ramcke, was to proceed along the coast.

343 - The reinforced paratrooper unit, the "Detachment Lt. Muerbe" (Detachment under the command of 1st Lieutenant Muerbe), which had landed by parachute near Kastelli on 20 May 1941 was a part of the force commanded by the author in Crete. Of the seventy-three men making up the unit, only eleven survived, all of them seriously wounded. Approaching in six Ju-52's, the Detachment selected a valley about two-thirds of a mile square, close to the coast and directly southeast of Kastelli, as the only possible landing area. The enemy, however, had established fortified positions in the hills and on the ridges overlooking the valley and had manned them with an understrengthened Greek regiment reinforced by a number of British instructors, and this force was well able to keep the valley under continual artillery fire. Even before 20 May, the enemy positions had been occupied night and day; they were kept supplied and reinforced by volunteer guerrillas from among the civilian population.

According to reports by wounded personnel, Lt. Muerbe's detachment had not even had a chance to recover the weapons containers dropped by air. Ten minutes after the detachment had landed, it had already been destroyed.

The civilian population was unbelievably brutal in its treatment of the more than sixty dead; only the courageous intervention of the British saved the wounded from a similar fate (based on the personal experience

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343 - (cont) of the author).

344 - The surviving paratroopers would never have been strong enough to have effected rapid clearance of the area on their own, particularly in view of the terrain difficulties involved.

In view of the relatively weak fire power of his forces, General Ringel was eager to avoid head-on attack whenever he could, preferring to take enemy positions by encirclement or by flank attack. The progress of the Mountain Infantry forces through this "merciless desert of rocks"³⁴⁵ was characterized by the motto "sweat saves bloodshed"³⁴⁶. The island did not even have paths, let alone roads, leading from west to east. The Mountain Infantry units had no alternative but to attack from mountain strongholds - and the British began to get scared, withdrawing from one coastal position after the other.

The Mountain Infantry forces, plagued by infernal heat during the day and by intense cold during the night ("... a cold which penetrates to the very marrow ...", in General Ringel's words³⁴⁷), had to carry not only their weapons and gear, including machine guns and mountain artillery pieces, but also their ammunition, their food, and - above all - their drinking water. The utter barrenness of the rocky desert precluded the establishment of any sort of reliable supply line - regardless of whether supplies were to be delivered by beast of burden or by motor vehicle. There is a great deal of truth in General Ringel's statement that "very rarely have troops been forced to march and fight under any worse conditions"³⁴⁸. In the foothills the troops were able to cover about one mile an hour provided they did not have to contend with enemy snipers. The marches had to be accomplished during the early morning or evening hours; the unbearable heat during the day (104° - 113° F., with no shade available!) precluded any movement whatsoever.

345 - General Ringel, op.cit., page 131.

346 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 22, column II.

347 - General Ringel, op.cit., page 132.

348 - General Ringel, op.cit., page 133.

The conditions faced by the rest of the parachute forces, the groups at Chania, Rethymnon, and Traklion, had remained substantially unchanged, i.e. weapons, ammunition, and foodstuffs were being delivered by air drop.

By the evening of 22 May 1941, the groups landed on Crete had still not managed to establish contact with one another.

Nevertheless, the headquarters staff in Athens seemed to consider the situation obtaining on the evening of 22 May more favorable than that of the previous day, despite the continuing lack of any definite data concerning the enemy situation. The most important goals were still to prevent the enemy from landing reinforcements during the night at Suda Bay, which was still not in German hands, and to keep him from utilizing the airfields on the eastern end of the island³⁴⁹. The over-all plan was to strengthen the Malemes bridgehead sufficiently so that it could be used as a base from which to encircle the British forces and drive them out of their naval stronghold on Suda Bay³⁵⁰.

349 - The official British report (given by General A. Wittmann, "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry), volume 3, 1954, page 6) reads as follows: "In the battle of Crete, the Germans have been unsuccessful in every sector but that of Malemes, which is the only city they have occupied so far. The defenders have an advantage over the German forces in that they have armored tanks at their disposal. The situation at Malemes is still undecided. There is reason to believe that the Germans may still be driven from the airfield." General von Waldau, at that time Chief of the Luftwaffe Operations Staff, made the following comment in his diary (page 47) on the occasion of his visit to Athens to confer with the Chief of the Luftwaffe General Staff at Fourth Air Fleet headquarters: "... a fine situation at command level, from top to bottom! ... There wasn't a trace of systematic planning or effective leadership in this operation until the 5th Mountain Infantry Division was brought into the picture!"

350 - Quoted from the diary of General Ringel (page 7, column I) by General A. Wittmann, op.cit. It is interesting to note that the "Reports on Crete" of the Fourth Air Fleet and the XI Air Corps do not contain any evaluation of the military situation as of 22 May 1941.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: Crete, showing the coastal highway.

Below: One of the many small coves dotting the northern
coast of Crete.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: Storm Regiment headquarters near Malemes.

Below: Colonel Heidrich's headquarters at Chania.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: Suda Bay

Below: Paratroopers advancing along the coastal
highway. Donkeys were used to tow the fully-
laden weapons containers.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: City of Chania after German bombardment.

Below: The harbor of Chania after German bombardment.

Germany's Italian allies were so favorably impressed by the development of the situation on Crete that they offered, on the evening of 22 May, to participate in the occupation of the island. The Italian commander at Do-decanes offered (among other things) to contribute an anti-tank company - which, however, never arrived³⁵¹. After referring the matter to the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, for decision, German leaders accepted the Italian offer. The Italian forces were to land on the eastern end of the island; a German liaison staff was dispatched to Rhodes to handle the details.

On 23 May 1941, seven British fighter aircraft and one British bomber landed on the airfield at Iraklion in defiance of heavy harrassing fire from the Combat Group East³⁵². One of the British aircraft burst into flames. In order to prevent further landings by British aircraft on Crete, it was decided to reinforce Combat Group East with parachute reserve forces which had been established in the meantime by the XI Air Corps. Made up in part of remnants of the 7th Air Division, the new parachute battalion was launched west of Iraklion on 24 May. The new battalion, however, like the original force, had no heavy weapons at its disposal and had no immediate effect on the situation in its area of operations³⁵³.

351 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 30, paragraph 5. An "offer", after all, was not really binding. In order to be really effective, the Italian forces ought to have attacked at once (in the opinion of the author). By the time the Italian Expeditionary Corps landed on eastern Crete on 28 May 1941 (!), the outcome of the operation had already been decided.

352 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 11; Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 35, paragraph II, 1.

353 - It took until 27 May to assemble and organize the newly-landed forces; from this day on, however, the airfield at Iraklion could be considered securely in German hands.

It proved infeasible to relieve the overburdened facilities of the Malemes airfield by routing traffic to the newly-secured and far better-equipped airfield at Iraklion. As a result, the original plan could not be put into operation.

On the evening of 23 May, contact was established between Combat Group West and Combat Group Center - at Stalos, a unit from the 3d Parachute Regiment ran into the 100th Mountain Infantry Regiment, which was advancing from Malemes in the southwest³⁵⁴.

During the same evening, the first single-engine fighter aircraft were transferred to Malemes³⁵⁵. Additional units from the 5th Mountain Infantry Division had already been flown to Malemes³⁵⁶.

In order to provide closer coordination between the VIII Air Corps and General Ringel's group by eliminating all the various intermediate stations previously needed to relay requests for air support, the Chief Signal Officer (Hoehrerer Nachrichtenfuhrer) of the Fourth Air Fleet set up a direct radio channel between the two organizations³⁵⁷. As a result, the VIII Air Corps was able to keep up a

354 - For detailed descriptions of the meeting, see XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 4, and Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 35, paragraph I, b.

355 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 36.

356 - The available sources do not provide specific information as to which units these were.

The study by W. Hornung ("Lufttransportversorgung der Insel Kreta", 26 October 1955) fails to conform to the facts in a number of points. On page 4, for example, Hornung states that "... the airfield at Rethymnon (!) could also be used until the evening of 22 May ... in this way, reinforcements were flown in for the hard-pressed 2d Parachute Regiment. Units from the 6th Mountain Infantry Division were flown in uninterrupted missions from the mainland to Rethymnon." Hornung is mistaken here. Colonel Sturm was kept prisoner by the British until 27 May, and the employment of units from the 6th Mountain Infantry Division was ordered by Generalfeldmarschall List on 25 May (regimental commander,

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356 - (cont) Colonel Jais). See the report by General A. Wittmann, "Die Gebirgstruppe" (Mountain Infantry), volume 3, 1954, page 10 ff. According to Generaloberst Student, the airfield at Rethymnon was not available for use until 1 June 1941.

357 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 36.

running attack on pockets of enemy resistance and on enemy artillery positions, thus smoothing the way for the paratrooper and mountain infantry forces. The VIII Air Corps attacked Suda Bay unrelentingly, and on 23 May, for example, sank five of a fleet of six British speedboats.

During the battle against the British naval forces in the waters north of Crete, VIII Air Corps units sank three destroyers³⁵⁸; only light vessels were sighted in the vicinity of Crete. There was no way of telling whether or not the majority of the British Alexandria Fleet had given up the fight³⁵⁹.

On 23 May, in any case, the enemy found it "... imperative that the strongest possible reinforcements be brought to the island in order to assure the destruction of the enemy forces already landed before the latter could, themselves, be reinforced."³⁶⁰

"The difficulties faced by the enemy and the losses in highly-trained troops sustained by him must be very great indeed; he cannot possibly continue at this pace." General Freyberg received the following message from Churchill:

"The eyes of the world are turned to your magnificent struggle, upon which so many significant developments depend."³⁶¹

General Ringel's tactic of advancing through the mountains,

358 - According to the diary of Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, more ships than just these three were sunk. A final summary of all the ships sunk or damaged during the battle of Crete is being prepared on the basis of all available sources (German, English, and Italian) and will be submitted as a separate appendix to the present study.

359 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 31, paragraph III.

360 - Churchill, op.cit., page 293.

361 - Churchill, op.cit., page 293. The "significant developments" included not only the threat to the Suez Canal, Cyprus, and the oil ports of Syria, but also potential effects on the fighting in North Africa and Egypt.

which was time-consuming but far safer in terms of personnel losses, might have given the enemy a chance to land quite strong reinforcements in Suda Bay, had it not been for the fact that the Luftwaffe kept enemy ship movements under constant surveillance during the day and subjected enemy vessels to effective bombardment. Only the fastest British ships were capable of covering the distance from Alexandria to Suda Bay and back (375 miles one way) in a single night in view of the fact that approximately one-half the route was within range of Luftwaffe aircraft. In any case, the British did not have sufficient fast ships at their disposal. And once German dive-bombers could be based on Crete, German air supremacy would be so complete that there would be no reason to fear further enemy landings.

Prompted by the situation reports of 23 May 1941, the Fourth Air Fleet initiated the following measures designed to facilitate the occupation of Crete:

XI Air Corps:

- a. Transport of additional reinforcements, particularly to General Ringel's group, in order to subdue enemy resistance once and for all. (The number of reinforcements, of course, was dependent upon the number of transport aircraft available).
- b. Air supply of the Combat Group on Crete.

VIII Air Corps:

- a. Armed aerial reconnaissance over every inch of the waters surrounding Crete.
- b. Provision of air support for the ground fighting on Crete.
- c. Prevention of enemy landings.
- d. Provision of protection for urgently necessary ocean supply transports.

Office of the Admiral (Southeast):

In keeping with the desperate need for renewed efforts to supply Crete from the sea, the Office of the Admiral (Southeast) was assigned the following missions:

- a. Provision of some measure of relief for the transport aircraft (and thus for the only island airfield in German hands - the one at Malemes.)
- b. Transport of heavy weapons, tanks, and vehicles which could not be carried by transport aircraft and which were urgently needed on Crete.

Ocean supply transports could be carried out only during the daylight hours; they must have reached their destinations by nightfall.

For this reason the bases at Melos and Cythera, which were to be used as home ports by the transport ships, were protected by light and heavy artillery.

By 24 May the ground fighting in the sector assigned to General Ringel's group had come to a halt before the enemy's well-fortified positions on both sides of Galatas (see the sketch on the following page).

"No change in the situation at Rethymnon and Iraklion."³⁶²

On 23 May two Mountain Artillery battalions, one Mountain Antitank Battalion, and the majority of the Motorcycle Rifle Battalion³⁶³ were landed at the airfield at Malemes; on 24 May,

³⁶² - Office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, Intelligence Branch, Situation Report No. 623, page 7. The situation reports issued by the Office of the Commander in Chief, Luftwaffe, sometimes contained rather strange information on Crete. On page 20, for example, we read that "... targets in the center of the city (i.e. Iraklion) were hit repeatedly by bombs. Enemy field fortifications and one enemy artillery position were destroyed."

The Luftwaffe did play a decisive part in the occupation of Crete, but it seems to be difficult - if not impossible - to describe its role in terms which do not appear ridiculous to anyone having first-hand knowledge of the situation.

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363 - The Motorcycle Rifle Battalion was transported, including motorcycles
and sidecars, by Ju-52's!

these forces were augmented by one reconnaissance battalion, one antiaircraft machine-gun battery, one and one-half Mountain Infantry Company³⁶⁴.

The majority of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division had now been landed on Crete³⁶⁵.

Section 6 - The Collapse of the Defending Forces after the Conquest of Chania.

On 25 May the enemy attacked the airfield at Malemes with a force of bombers and fighters based in Egypt³⁶⁶. This attack, however, was too weak and came too late to have any real effect on the development of events. The only tangible result was to limit the airfield's usefulness to the invaders by blockading the landing strips with wrecked aircraft³⁶⁷. German losses were relatively slight.

During the night of 24/25 May, specially selected British vessels, most of them destroyers, succeeded in landing reinforcements and supplies at Suda Bay³⁶⁸. All of the enemy forces in the Chania and Suda Bay areas had been moved to Galatas,

364 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 34, paragraph I, 1.

365 - General A. Wittmann, op.cit., page 9. General Wittmann, as commanding general of the 95th Mountain Artillery Regiment, was an eye-witness to the events on Crete, thus a genuine source of information!

366 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 22.

367 - This situation can be compared with that of the airfield at Waalhaven in Holland on 12 May 1940, during the campaign in the West (see the author's study concerning the employment of the air landing forces in the West during 1940). Waalhaven, too, was the "only available airfield" within enemy territory (Fortress Holland).

368 - As early as the evening of 24 May, the British Fleet no longer had any real chance to wrest possession of the island from the German invaders. British political leaders, however, were not ready to concede the loss of the island to the enemy.

The air superiority enjoyed by the Luftwaffe made it impossible for British naval forces to operate during the day, hence the night landings (also during the night of 26/27 and 27/28 May).

in the mountainous region west of Chania. Operating from this position, they were to provide a last-resort defense of the capital city and Suda Bay. It was here that the decisive battle for the possession of Crete took place.

Generalfeldmarschall List, "deeply concerned over the outcome of the battle for Crete"³⁶⁹, ordered an additional Mountain Infantry Division placed at the disposal of the XI Air Corps - as reinforcement for General Ringel's group. This Regiment (the 141st, under the command of Colonel Jais) did not arrive on Crete until 26 May.

In the meantime, General Student, Commanding General of the XI Air Corps, had landed at Malemes on the morning of 25 May and had proceeded immediately to General Ringel's headquarters³⁷⁰.

PHOTOGRAPH

General der Flieger Student visiting
the headquarters of Colonel Ramcke on Crete
on 25 May 1941 (Student right, Ramcke with
white scarf and fieldglasses).

³⁶⁹ - General A. Wittmann, op.cit., page 10.

³⁷⁰ - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 5.

The attacks carried out by the VIII Air Corps on Galatas, Chania, and Suda Bay did much to weaken enemy resistance. Galatas was occupied during the afternoon of 26 May, only to be lost again in the evening³⁷¹ to a British counter-attack carried out with the support of armored forces. In "murderous infighting"³⁷², Colonel Ramcke's paratrooper group (moving along the coast to form the left flank) and the 100th Mountain Infantry Regiment (under the command of Colonel Utz) managed to gain some ground as night fell. The battle lasted throughout the night, the British hanging on "like bulldogs"³⁷³. By daybreak the village of Galatas was again in German hands, after a struggle which had taken heavy toll on both sides.

Yielding to the pressure brought to bear by the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment (under the command of Colonel Krakau), which had advanced through the mountains south of Galatas, the British forces had retreated from their key positions just before Chania³⁷⁴.

Admiral Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief of the Alexandria Fleet, had ordered an attack for 26 May on the German air base on the island of Sarpanto, east of Crete. The attack was to be carried out by aircraft from the 23,000 ton aircraft carrier "Formidable", escorted

371 - During the evening hours for the simple reason that there was no Luftwaffe interference to contend with!

372 - These are General Wittmann's exact words!

373 - The King of Greece, who had fled to Crete and was in hiding somewhere between Galatas and Chania, was barely able to escape to safety in Egypt. On the evening of 26 May, General Freyberg reported to Field Marshal Wavell that "... our position here is hopelessly untenable!" (Churchill, op.cit., page 295). Churchill replied as follows: "It is absolutely imperative that we achieve victory on Crete at this time. Throw in everything you have that could make our struggle a success!"

by two cruisers and eight destroyers. The purpose of the attack was to destroy any German and Italian aircraft located at the base and to prevent the anticipated landing of Italian forces on the island of Crete. Only eight (!) British aircraft took off from the "Formidable"³⁷⁵, and the total extent of their success was to damage slightly several German aircraft on the ground. German dive-bombers attacking the "Formidable", on the other hand, managed to land two direct hits which resulted in serious damage for the aircraft carrier. One of the escort destroyers (the "Nubian") was also severely hit. It was only with great difficulty that the attack fleet was able to make it back to Alexandria.

On the same day, a second British naval unit, made up of the battleship "Barham" (31,000 tons), two cruisers, and five destroyers, was attacked by Ju-88's and He-111's southeast of Casco. The "Barham" received a number of direct hits. All British fleet elements, including the convoys on their way to Crete with reinforcements, were ordered on 27 May to head back to Alexandria; for the moment, all hope of reaching Crete with reinforcements and supplies was abandoned.

General Freyberg³⁷⁶ reluctantly reported that the troops under his command at Suda Bay " ...have reached the outside limits of human endurance - a small, ill-equipped, and relatively immobile force cannot hope to withstand concentrated air attacks of the kind we have experienced during the last week ..." The British no longer had

375 - General Ludovico, op.cit., page 14; see also footnote , page).

376 - Churchill, op.cit., page 295.

sufficient troops at their disposal to mount a large-scale offensive action. The relentless activity³⁷⁷ of the German Luftwaffe had done much to break the enemy's fighting morale.

On 27 May 1941, Chania³⁷⁸ finally fell into German hands, after preliminary bombardment had caused fires and property damage throughout the city. Paratroopers from the Ramcke and Heidrich Groups and infantry troops from the 100th and 141st Mountain Infantry Regiments converged on the city from all sides nearly simultaneously. This unexpectedly rapid success - the sudden collapse of the enemy defenses on the island's main front - was due exclusively to the untiring efforts of the mountain infantry forces. The tortuous route covered by the "Krakau" group, from the 85th Mountain Infantry Regiment, was an "introduction to Dante's Inferno"³⁷⁹.

General Wittman, commander of the advance group from the Mountain Infantry Regiment, describes it as follows³⁸⁰:

"For almost three whole days and nights the members of our 85th, sweating profusely under the load of their heavy equipment, struggled on through this desert of stone - no shade, no water, nothing but the pitiless sun reflected from the burning and barren rocks (naked cliffs as high as 6,500 ft.), their heat certainly near to the boiling point. The troops are still forced to be their own beasts of burden...

Apparently the British could not believe that physical feats such as these were humanly possible. A tough and courageous fighter, the British soldier was not suited either psychologically or physically for 'punishment' of this kind."

377 - Churchill, op.cit., page 294.

378 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 8;

379 - General Wittman, op.cit., page 12; see also the diagram on the following page.

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380 - General Wittmann, op.cit., page 12 ff.

As soon as the threat of a German encirclement action became apparent, it was clear that any attempt by the British to hold Chania or Suda Bay was quite pointless. Thus, in order to avoid being caught in a hopeless situation on 28 May, the British forces began to withdraw as rapidly as possible. An 800-man strong commando troop³⁸¹ was landed at Suda Bay during the night of 26/27 May to cover the British retreat towards the south.

On 28 May Suda Bay fell into German hands, and the battle of Crete was over³⁸².

381 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 296. The commando troops, under the leadership of Colonel Laydock, were landed near Suda by the mine-layer "Abdiel" during the night of 26/27 May. Relatively fresh, these troops fought effectively in a rear guard action which enabled the surviving British forces from the Malemes and Chania sectors to make their way to the southern coast of the island (a repetition of the success at Dunkirk!)

382 - On 25 May, the Wehrmacht High Command had finally lifted the ban on information concerning Operation MERKUR and issued the following official bulletin: "Since the early morning hours of 20 May, German parachute and air landing forces have been engaged in combat against elements of the British Army on the island of Crete. With the valuable support of fighter, bomber, and dive-bomber units, they have carried out a bold attack leading to the capture of tactically important points on the island. Reinforced by newly arrived units of the German Army, the ground forces have switched to the offensive. Nearly all of the western part of the island is already in German hands. Joint operations by paratrooper air landing, and Army forces are continuing according to plan. The German Luftwaffe has succeeded in frustrating an attempt by the Royal Navy to intervene in the battle for Crete by driving it out of the waters north of the island and by sinking or damaging a large number of enemy vessels". (It is interesting to note here that no exact numbers, names of ships, or further details are given; apparently the Wehrmacht High Command was skeptical of the accuracy of the operational reports received. Author's note). "The Luftwaffe has achieved air supremacy over the entire area. Italian naval and air units have been participating in the battle of Crete since 20 May and have contributed a great deal to the victories so far achieved." (This would seem to be flagrant exaggeration. If the Italians had really played an effective role, contributing

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382 - (cont) a substantial naval force, attacking Malta, etc., then British power in the Mediterranean could have been broken once and for all! Instead the Italians failed to recognize and take advantage of this "moment of weakness" of the English. Author's note). "Yesterday the German Luftwaffe again participated in the battle of Crete with overwhelming success. Under cover provided by fighter aircraft, the transport units released paratroopers over the island to strengthen the ground force. German bombers carried out effective attacks on enemy artillery employment, machine-gun nests, barracks, camps, and troop assembly areas; they destroyed a number of British artillery posts and radio stations, demolished two aircraft on the ground, and sank a merchant ship of 1000 gross registered tons south of Crete."

The bulletin issued by the Wehrmacht High Command for 27 May 1941 reads as follows: "In spite of extremely difficult terrain conditions, German mountain infantry troops succeeded yesterday in breaking the inordinately tough resistance offered by British forces and Greek insurgent troops. In a bold attack, our forces drove the enemy from his strongholds, seized the city of Chania, and pursued the defeated forces south of Suda Bay."

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: A machine-gun emplacement utilized during the
battle of Galatas.

Below: The monument to the fallen at Galatas. Built
by the survivors of the Storm Regiment on one
of the unconquerable hills, the monument is
topped by a diving eagle.

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: General Student (right, nearest the wall)
in conversation with General Ringel (stand-
ing in the sidecar of his motorcycle).

Below: General Student examining one of the enemy
tanks captured on Crete.

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PHOTOGRAPH

Our photograph shows Crete's only
through highway, the coastal road -
narrow, full of curves, and in poor
repair!

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PHOTOGRAPH

The port of Chania. To the right of the photograph, the harbor itself, its maximum depth of six and one-half to ten feet making it navigable only for small coastal shipping. In the upper left-hand corner we see the swastika displayed outside the headquarters of the Harbor Commander, Ltjg (Leutnant zur See) Oesterlin.

General Ringel assigned the task of clearing the Akrotiri Peninsula (north of Suda Bay) to the parachute forces, and went on to lead the units under Colonel Jais and Colonel Krakau in the pursuit of the retreating enemy forces. The advance battalion, under the command of Lt. Colonel Wittmann, succeeded in relieving the combat group from the 2d Parachute Regiment after heavy fighting near Rethymnon (see the map on the following page) during the day of 29 May.

At Iraklion, too, the enemy had attempted to bring up reinforcements. On 24 May elements of the "Argyp and Sutherland Highland" Regiment had landed at Timbaki³⁸³ on the southern coast and had fought their way through to Iraklion. The majority of this enemy force was decimated by the German parachute battalion led by Major Vogel, which had landed on the island on 24 May as reinforcement for Combat Group East. On 28 May, additional reinforcements in the form of a parachute battalion made up of the survivors of a number of various units and placed under the command of Captain Boehmler³⁸⁴, landed east of the Iraklion airfield (see the map on the following page).

With the help of the reinforcements mentioned above, on 29 May Colonel Braeuer's group was ordered to seize the airfield at Iraklion.

383 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 297.

384 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 12.

A sharp increase in enemy naval activity off Iraklion was noted during the night of 28/29 May. The British had sent in boats to facilitate the evacuation of the 4,000 troops³⁸⁵ stationed at Iraklion.

On the morning of 29 May, when the German attack on the Iraklion airfield got under way, the paratroopers found the area already clear of enemy forces. Both the airfield and the city of Iraklion were captured.

The evacuation operation, however, resulted in heavy losses for the British. The evacuation fleet (the cruisers "Orion", "Ajax", and "Dido" plus six destroyers as escort) was harrassed by German dive-bombers from early in the morning of 29 May until afternoon, when it finally came within sight of Alexandria. Two of the destroyers, the "Imperial and the "Herewarth", were sunk with all the troops on board, while the cruisers were subjected to serious damage in the Straits of Caso.

"The conditions on board the "Orion" were dreadful", writes Churchill³⁸⁶, "... in addition to its crew personnel, there were 1,100 troops on board. A single German bomb, which landed on the bridge, killed 260 men and wounded 280 others ..." The ship caught fire. More than one-fifth of the British forces evacuated from Iraklion were killed during the journey to Alexandria.

*

*

*

On 27 May, General Freyberg was given permission to evacuate his troops from the island³⁸⁷. There was no chance of their retreating via the harbors

385 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 298; C.M. Davin, op.cit., page 481, states that the defending force at Iraklion comprised 8,024 troops, some 3,000 of whom were Greek volunteers. No action was taken to evacuate the wounded.

386 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 298.

387 - C.M. Davin, op.cit., page 388. Final permission to evacuate the island was granted only after lengthy communiques had been exchanged among the British Middle East Command Headquarters (Englisches Oberkommando Mittel-ost), i.e. General Wavell and Admiral Cunningham, and the British

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387 - (cont) Admiralty in London. The fiasco suffered by the Royal Navy was
the final motivating factor.

on the northern coast of Crete. The roads to Rethymnon and Iraklion were already blocked by German mountain infantry troops. Only the southern coast, to all intents and purposes completely free of harbors, offered a base of operations for an organized retreat from the island.

Sphakia³⁸⁸, the assembly point for the British forces, is a small fishing village at the foot of rocky cliffs plunging steeply into the sea from a height of 5,250 ft., on the southern coast of the island. These cliffs can be crossed only by means of an almost perpendicular goat trail. It was here that some 22,000 men³⁸⁹, British and Greek troops³⁹⁰, were ordered to assemble to board the evacuation ships. Here they were forced to remain hidden while a desperate rear guard action was being fought against the pursuing 100th Mountain Infantry Regiment in the trackless and waterless wastes of the barren mountains (see the map on the following page).

During the course of four nights, beginning on 28 May, the British succeeded in evacuating the majority of their forces from Crete with the help of the cruisers, destroyers, and troop transport ships of the Royal Navy.

The British evacuation action was a masterpiece - one whose scope and effectiveness were not fully appreciated by the Fourth Air Fleet³⁹¹.

During the day the British naval forces, including the fast transport ship "Glengyle" (capacity: 3,000 troops), were given constant air cover by Air Marshal Tedder's small force of Egypt-based fighter aircraft.

388 - Also spelled "Skafia" and "Sphakion".

389 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 297; C.M. Davin, op.cit., indicates on page 521 that some 17,000 troops were evacuated ("allowing foormen killed on passage", sic.)

390 - Very few Greek troops were actually evacuated with the British forces.

391 - Colonel W. Gaul, op.cit., page 13: "... four cruisers, twelve destroyers, one mine sweeper, and one transport ship made up the force which transported the 17,000 British troops back to Alexandria..."

The difficulties involved in getting the troops on board³⁹² during the few hours of darkness available, with only small landing boats to fall back on, were truly enormous. The departure from the "pier" of Sphakia also had to be accomplished in the dark. The British evacuation fleet was already well on its way to salvation in Alexandria by the time the VIII Air Corps units, already exhausted both physically and mentally, had taken off from the Greek mainland and made their way to the waters south of Crete³⁹³.

Nevertheless, evacuation of the island cost the enemy dearly in both personnel and materiel³⁹⁴. On 1 June the antiaircraft cruiser "Calcutta" sank after several direct hits by German bombers. A number of cruisers and destroyers were severely damaged.

392 - C.M. Davin, op.cit., page 521: "miscounting on embarkation".

393 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 42, records the following mission: "... armed reconnaissance over the Aegean as far south of Crete as aircraft range allows..." In the all-out effort to relieve the forces cut off at Rethymmon and at Iraklion as soon as possible, insufficient forces were assigned to the task of pursuing the enemy, whose strength had been badly underestimated, and preventing his evacuating the island during the night.

394 - During May 1941, the following British vessels were damaged in the waters around the island of Crete:

- a. Battleships: "Warspite" and "Valiant" (33,000 tons, with a speed of 25 nautical miles per hour and a crew of 1,800 men. Built in 1913 and 1922 respectively, they had been renovated and fitted with catapults.)
- b. Light Cruisers: "Perth", "Orion", "Ajax", and "Dido" (7,000 tons on the average, with an average speed of 32 nautical miles per hour and an average crew of 574 men; built during the years 1932 through 1935).
- c. "Napier" and "Kelvin" (no data).

(Based on Weyer's "Taschenbuch der Kriegsflotten" (Pocket Manual of Military Naval Forces), Volume XXVIII, 1934, J.F. Lehmann Verlag, Munich).

The following British vessels were sunk in the waters around Crete during May 1941:

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394 - (cont)

- a. Cruisers: "Calcutta", "Gloucester", "Fiji", "Kelly", "Kashmir".
- b. Destroyers: "Greyhound", "Juno", "Imperial", "Hereward", as well as one submarine.

The following were damaged:

- a. Cruisers: "Dido", "Perth", "Ajax", "Orion".
 - b. Aircraft Carriers: "Formidable".
 - c. Destroyers: "Napier", "Kelvin".
 - d. Miscellaneous assault boats, landing boats, etc.
-

By 1 June 1941, the battle for the island of Crete had come to an end³⁹⁵.

"A victory without parallel had been achieved - the result of true inter-service cooperation. Luftwaffe, Navy, and Army have all done their best."³⁹⁶

"For the very first time, a higher-level Luftwaffe headquarters had been in charge of an operation in which all three Wehrmacht branches took part."³⁹⁷

395 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 40, paragraph I, 2.

The bulletin issued by the Wehrmacht High Command read as follows:

"The struggle for Crete is over. The whole island has been cleared of enemy forces." The British Ministry of War, on the other hand, released the following bulletin: "After twelve days of the hardest fighting yet encountered in this war, it was decided to withdraw our forces from the island."

Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 53, reports laconically:

"Mission accomplished. Crete cleared of enemy forces as of today."

396 - General A. Wittmann, op.cit., page 19, column II.

397 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52, paragraph I b: "The achievement of this unique victory was made possible only by the indomitable courage demonstrated by parachute forces and the mountain infantry troops on Crete in the face of tremendously difficult climatic and topographical conditions and by the untiring and exemplary employment of the air transport forces and the units of the VIII Air Corps."

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: The dead, their bodies often bearing the marks of brutality on the part of the native guerrillas or partly decomposed as a result of climatic factors, were buried in mass graves.

Below: Parachute and mountain infantry troops standing in front of the graves (distinguishable by the paratrooper uniform, left above, and the "Edelweiss" shoulder patch, right above).

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PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

Above: General Student expresses his thanks to General-feldmarschall List, Commander in Chief, Twelfth Army, for the assistance rendered by the mountain infantry forces in the occupation of Crete.

Below: The "Crete" arm-band, shown here, was awarded to all those who participated in the battle of Crete.

The German victory on Crete has given rise to a number of commentaries and critiques. The British General Fuller, for example, writes as follows³⁹⁸:

"As regards sheer daring, the air attack on Crete is the most outstanding of the entire war. An operation of this sort had never been attempted before and was never tried again afterwards. It was not really an air attack, but rather an invasion from the air, with the invading army approaching by air rather than by land or by water. Its most significant characteristic was the fact that the forces involved were moved by air transport - the lifting of an entire army into the air, thus assuring its complete independence of highway and railway networks and of the need for cross-country marches. The battle of Cambrai in the year 1917 was the first example of an invasion from the air, and even the relatively primitive technological developments which made it possible represented a revolution in tactics."

Winston Churchill³⁹⁹, however, belittles the scope of the battle of Crete, stating that:

"Goering's victory in Crete, however, was no more than a Pyrrhic victory, for the troops he was forced to sacrifice in order to take Crete could have been utilized to capture Cyprus, Iraq, Syria, and possibly even Persia..."

The losses in elite troops sustained during the battle of Crete - and they were undeniably very high - effectively deterred German strategists from employing their air landing forces in the subsequent operations in the Middle East. We are justified in asking whether it was really wise to squander an indispensable force such as this in a life and death battle to capture a single base.

398 - Generalmajor J.F.C. Fuller, Der Zweite Weltkrieg, 1939 - 1945 (The Second World War, 1939 - 1945), Humboldt-Verlag, Vienna and Stuttgart, 1952, page 128.

399 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 302.

The Italians failed to take advantage of the momentary weakness of the British naval position in the Mediterranean which had been brought about by the action in Crete. As a result, the operations in the eastern Mediterranean area never had very much significance as far as the subsequent course of the war was concerned.

The enemy has on occasion⁴⁰⁰ been reproached with the fact that he had been present on Crete since October 1940 and had failed to utilize the seven months at his disposal to prepare an adequate defense for the island.

During the course of these seven months, however, Crete had had a total of no less than seven different commanders. Moreover, there were neither experts (i.e. engineer personnel) nor manpower available to take on the task of constructing a network of fortifications. By the time the last commander, General Freyberg, took over, he no longer had sufficient time to adapt his - suddenly urgent - defensive measures to the exigencies created by the island's topography. All Crete's harbors and airfields were located on the northern coast of the island. The main point of defense, on the other hand, was concentrated in the area of Suda Bay - in the vicinity of the fleet! Because of this, the defense of the rest of the island was sadly neglected. No definite plans had been made to prepare the island of Crete for defensive operations; the Middle East was far too large an area that General Wavell could be expected to pay particular attention to Crete, located at the periphery of the overall theater of operations.

The island was vulnerable only from the north! Why, then, did the British take no action to develop the harbors on the southern coast?⁴⁰¹ Why was no attempt made to build new airfields in the south and to transfer the main supply depots to the southern part of the island?

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400 - General Fuller, op.cit., page 129: " The battle of Crete was lost not in May 1941, but rather during November 1940 and the months preceding it."

401 - See the military-geographical evaluation of the island at the beginning of the present study.

It may be pertinent to point out here that the British never considered seriously the possibility that they might lose Greece. The airfields on Crete had only one purpose - that of support for the operations on the Greek mainland. It was for this reason that they were located on the northern coast of the island. The British made a grave mistake in not destroying the airfields once they had fallen into German hands. That they did not was due to the spirit of optimism prevailing in General Freyberg's headquarters, on the one hand, and to the extremely good morale of the English troops, on the other. Both sides - and this is an unusual situation in wartime - were forced to fight because they had no other alternative. The British soldiers "never fought better than on Crete"⁴⁰². By the same token, "Crete was the grave of the German paratroopers"⁴⁰³.

The Germans overestimated the degree of pro-Axis sympathy on the part of the native population and underestimated the will to resist on the part of the British forces.

The German victory on Crete was the result of a single factor - the air superiority achieved by the Luftwaffe!

In the last analysis, it seems doubtful that the tactic of landing paratroopers directly over their target can be considered an error on the part of the German planners. Undeniably, a landing could have been made at some distance from the target, west of Malemes for example, where far less enemy resistance would have been encountered. On the other hand, it is questionable whether the occupation of the island could have been accomplished in such a short time and with significantly fewer losses than was actually the case. And time was short - for Operation MERKUR was to be followed immediately by the campaign against Soviet Russia, Operation BARBAROSSA.

It is hardly necessary to deny the completely groundless rumor to the effect that the German paratroopers had been given special drugs, a kind of "courage pill", which were

responsible for their victories⁴⁰⁴. This much-vaunted "courage pill" was nothing more than Pervitin⁴⁰⁵, which certain paratrooper units were testing for its effectiveness against air sickness.

The extremely high losses sustained by the parachute forces on Crete came as a shock to Hitler. Ironically, it was precisely the successful air landing operation on Crete which robbed Hitler of his faith in an air landing arm⁴⁰⁶.

No official evaluation of the air landing victory on Crete was made by Germany's top-level command. Nevertheless, "this battle was a milestone along the road of military history, an event with revolutionary significance for the science of waging war. We must bear in mind that

404 - Generaloberst Student, op.cit., page 23, refers to a comment made by Allan Moorhead (an Australian war correspondent) to the effect that "... the British found the bodies of German paratroopers, which had turned a vivid green within a few hours after death. Obviously they had been given narcotics of some kind. An Australian tried the 'stuff' and experienced a feeling of "emphoric enthusiasm" so strong that his companions had to restrain him forcibly from attacking an enemy emplacement all by himself."

In an attempt to defame the German paratroopers, some journalists reported that they landed in the uniform of the New Zealand Army. Similar accusations had been made in connection with the air landing operation in Holland in 1940.

None of these malicious allegations is based on fact.

405 - Pervitin is a preparation taken to combat a feeling of tiredness and to prevent air sickness.

406 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 23. During a reception at Rastenburg on 19 July 1941 for the recipients of the Iron Cross, Hitler casually made the following statement to Generaloberst Student: "Crete has proven that the days of the parachute forces are over! A paratrooper arm is exclusively a surprise weapon, and the surprise factor is pretty much worn out."

In this context, the reader is also referred to Liddel Hart, Jetzt duerfen sie reden (Now They Can Speak), Stuttgarter Verlag, Stuttgart and Hamburg, 1950, page 294 ff.

the occupation of Crete represented the first time in military history that a large and well-defended island had been taken from the air."

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Section 7 - Sea and Air Supply of the Forces Fighting on Crete⁴⁰⁷.

The supply difficulties already apparent to the planners of Operation MERKUR⁴⁰⁸ proved subsequently to be the very factors which threatened the over-all accomplishment of the operation⁴⁰⁹.

The majority of the supplies needed by the forces fighting on Crete were transported by ship. The following brief account of the supply operations carried out by the German Navy during the action on Crete is based on the report of the Naval Group South (Marine Gruppenkommando Sued)⁴¹⁰.

407 - See also Chapter V, Section 4, page 55 ff of the present study. The available sources which deal with the problem of supply during Operation MERKUR have only limited validity inasmuch as:

- a. Generalmajor Seibt's report (op.cit.) was prepared from memory, and
- b. the available studies by Lt.Col. Hornung (op.cit.), based on the diaries of Generalmajor Conrad, Air Commander (Fliegerfuehrer), are not entirely accurate in every detail. Lt.Col. Hornung obviously has not had access to complete information regarding the course of operations, the employment of the troops, and their individual assignments. As a result, his report is often completely useless for certain vitally important phases of the action.

408 - For example the fact that aviation gasoline was not available when needed, definitely jeopardized the success of the over-all operation.

409 - The threat to Operation MERKUR can be broken down into the following factors:

- a. the fact that Operation BARBAROSSA was about to begin,
- b. the fact that Operation SEELOEWE had been postponed, but not given up entirely; accordingly most of the necessary supplies were still in storage in northwestern France, in the vicinity of Leon.
- c. the bases on the Greek mainland were just about the worst possible take-off area for a short-term air landing operation.

410 - Naval Group South, "Brief Report", classified, dated 9 September 1941 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

1. 114 small ships (most of them sailboats equipped with engines) were available to transport some 11,320 tons in personnel (including elements of the occupation force) and materiel, including artillery, motor vehicles (among them five 10-ton tanks), ammunition, weapons, food, and assorted equipment to the island of Crete.

2. There were nineteen fairly large steamers available, transporting a total of 230,000 tons of supplies during the course of the operation⁴¹¹.

During supply transport operations from 1 May through 10 June 1941, ten of these steamers (representing a loading capacity of over 20,000 tons) were destroyed by enemy mines or torpedos. The ships were a mixed lot, belonging to German, Rumanian, Bulgarian, Greek, Italian, and French companies!

During the same period, ten of the smaller boats (representing approximately 2,000 tons' capacity) were also lost.

The main factors which made it difficult to supply the troops fighting on Crete by ship were the following:

1. the inadequacy of loading and unloading facilities in the Cretan harbors,
2. a certain lack of reliability on the part of the foreign agencies involved in supply transactions,
3. the tendency of Army and Luftwaffe headquarters to label all supply actions top priority, and
4. the passive resistance offered by the crews of the foreign-owned ships!

411 - There is no information available as to what percentage of these supplies was destined for the force which had landed on Crete originally and what percentage was destined for the occupying force which arrived later.

Inevitably, these difficulties had a detrimental effect on all attempts to solve the supply problem successfully.

Despite the fact that coordination between the Navy agencies charged with responsibility for supply operations and the Fourth Air Fleet was relatively good⁴¹², there is some truth in the contention that "the majority of the air units had not enjoyed such intensive training in sea/air operations" as might have been desirable in view of the fact that they were expected to take part in them rather frequently. The situation was aggravated further by difficulties in the communications field; German leaders were at a definite disadvantage in this respect anyway, due to the "purely arbitrary" composition of most of their units⁴¹³.

During the initial stage of operations (20 May through 27 May 1941), only the smaller boats could be sent through with supplies for the troops fighting on the island⁴¹⁴, inasmuch as unloading facilities at Malemes and Kastelli were incapable of handling larger ships. It was not until Suda Bay had been taken and cleared of enemy forces that larger vessels could be employed⁴¹⁵.

Inasmuch as the ocean supply transports were inadequate (a large percentage of them never reaching the island), it was up to the transport aircraft to ensure continuous supply by air. There were three possible methods of carrying out air supply operations to the island of Crete:

412 - Admiral Schuster, Diary, page 7.

413 - On 21 May, the Italian destroyer "Sagittario" was attacked by German dive-bombers by mistake (Admiral Schuster, Diary, page 5).

414 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 39.

415 - In the opinion of the author, the German Navy was physically incapable of fulfilling the missions assigned to it, especially during the initial phase of Operation MERKUR. This opinion is not reflected, however, in any of the other sources consulted. The question of whether the mission was even capable of fulfillment under the circumstances, i.e. whether

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415 - (cont) it was asking the impossible of the relatively primitive naval facilities available, must remain open.

In this connection, the reader is referred to the comments of the Naval Command Headquarters. (Marginal remarks on the reports received. See page of the present study for a discussion of the mistakes made by command and front units).

1. Dropping supply containers by air. This method had the undeniable advantage that the supplies reached their destination, i.e. the fighting troops, directly and quickly, without having to be reloaded for surface transport over often dangerous highway networks. On the other hand, there were a number of disadvantages to be considered.

a. In view of the difficult terrain and the rapidly changing front lines, it was inevitable that the ground forces were^Iunable to locate a large percentage of the weapons, ammunition, and supply containers once they had been landed, and that some were dropped over enemy territory⁴¹⁶.

b. There was only a limited number of supply containers available⁴¹⁷.

c. The military situation might change entirely during the time elapsing between the original request for supplies and their actual delivery.

2. Landing supplies. As long as none of the airfields on Crete was in German hands, the transport aircraft landed their supplies on the beach⁴¹⁸.

Beach landings were extremely hard on the transport aircraft - so much so that nearly 50% of them were so badly damaged that they were unable to participate in subsequent actions⁴¹⁹.

416 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part B, page 4: "... the paratroopers were unable to get to the containers dropped to them..."(Malemes). Ibid., page 8: "Since there was no reliable supply delivery system in the tightly-limited combat theater (Rethymmon), 1/Lt. von Roon set up a central supply depot and secured it against enemy harrassment."

417 - Generalmajor Seibt's report (op.cit.) does not give the exact number of containers on hand. According to notes made at the time by the author, each company in the Storm Regiment had been issued weapons and supply containers for its own use - perhaps 80-100 each. In addition, the Regiment had a reserve supply of containers, already packed and labeled, at its take-off bases. All in all, the four battalions of the Storm Regiment have had about 2,000 containers. The rest of the paratrooper units had presumably been issued containers on a similar basis.

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418 - The Air Commander, XI Air Corps, had ordered his transport pilots to "... land at all costs..."

419 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part B, page 1. According to this source, single Ju-52's succeeded in landing on the Malemes beach during the early morning hours of 21 May to deliver ammunition. According to Generalmajor Seibt, "...they landed on the beach but only half of them came back..."

3. Landing supplies at the Malemes airfield. This method was the one chiefly in use in air supply operations during the first few days. Since the XI Air Corps on Crete needed 150 to 200 tons of supplies per day⁴²⁰, approximately 100 Ju-52's had to be employed daily.

Despite the extremely crowded conditions on the Malemes airfield, air supply operations went off smoothly - apart from one or two bottlenecks - and the ground troops were kept adequately supplied, primarily with antitank ammunition and drinking water.

During the over-all period of combat, the following supplies were brought to Crete by air⁴²¹:

711 motorcycles

353 light artillery pieces

5,358 supply drop containers⁴²²

1,090,180 kg of other supplies.

During the period from 20 May through 31 May 1941, the transport aircraft covered a total of 1,485,532 miles.

A total of 3,173 wounded personnel were brought out of Crete by air during this period.

420 - Generalmajor Seibt, op.cit., page 7. The supplies sent in by air consisted almost exclusively of ammunition and weapons, since food supplies could be requisitioned on the island.

421 - Alkmar von Hove, op.cit., page 196. These data can be assumed to be accurate, since Generaloberst Student, in a special introduction to the book, speaks of the "accurate picture" it presents of the paratroopers' operations on Crete. The figures quoted were probably checked and corrected, when necessary, by General Student.

422 - The total given here agrees with the rough estimate made by the author in footnote 417, page 208.

CHAPTER X

The Losses Sustained⁴²³

The losses sustained during the occupation of Crete were unusually high. Any attempt to establish a definitive total figure is fraught with difficulty because of the following factors:

1. An unspecified number of wounded personnel were transferred to the mainland and succumbed there to their injuries (slightly wounded personnel were usually not included in the figures we have available⁴²⁴).
2. Only a very few of those reported as missing were ever found; the vast majority must be presumed to have died in action.
3. In the not infrequent instances in which all the officer and non-commissioned officer personnel of a company had been killed or taken prisoner, the personnel loss reports were often inaccurate.

The inordinately high number of personnel listed as missing during the battle of Crete can be explained in part by the fact that the paratroopers landed at points remotely distant from one another. In addition, the course of the front line was extremely unstable, the terrain enormously difficult (bristling with rocky hills, ravines, and brushwood), and the native guerrillas extremely active.

423 - The loss figures which follow have been divided as follows:

1. German losses - personnel and materiel (separated according to Luftwaffe or Army).
2. Enemy losses - personnel losses divided into those killed in action and those taken prisoner (ship losses and other materiel losses given separately).

424 - D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 488: "...the German figures are falsified... with the proviso that the lightly wounded may not be included." Unfortunately there are no statistics available from the VIII Air Corps.

There are a number of sources which contain figures on the losses sustained⁴²⁵; in the interests of completeness, the author has listed them all here so that the reader can compare them, but in the last analysis they are in fairly close agreement.

1. German losses

a. Personnel losses

The following forces were employed:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1) 7th Air Division and XI Air Corps: | 13,000 |
| 2) 5th Mountain Infantry Division: | <u>9,000</u> |
| | total 22,000 ⁴²⁶ |

Losses were as follows⁴²⁷:

1) 7th Air Division and XI Air Corps

dead: 143 officers, 1510 non-commissioned officers and troops
 missing: 28 officers, 1413 non-commissioned officers and troops
 wounded: 103 officers, 1943 non-commissioned officers and troops

2) 5th Mountain Infantry Division

dead: 17 officers, 245 non-commissioned officers and troops
 missing: 12 officers, 306 non-commissioned officers and troops
 wounded: 20 officers, 438 non-commissioned officers and troops.

425 - 1. Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52;

2. XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 14;

3. General Wittmann, op.cit., Appendix "Other Data";

4. Alkmar von Hove, op.cit., page 295;

5. D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 487 ff; and other sources.

426 - Other sources (including Davin, op.cit.) give the total as 23,120.

427 - Based on the data contained in the XI Air Corps, Report on Crete.

3) Air Commander, XI Air Corps

dead: 9 officers, 47 non-commissioned officers, and troops
 missing: 16 officers, 113 non-commissioned officers and troops
 wounded: 20 officers, 70 non-commissioned officers and troops.

The total number of dead and missing personnel from the XI Air Corps was 3,279 (including officers, non-commissioned officers, and troops).

The total number of wounded was 2,136 (including officers, non commissioned officers, and troops).

Another source⁴²⁸ classifies losses into those suffered by the troops fighting on the ground and those suffered by the flying units, and comes to the following conclusions:

1) ground troops

dead: 1,915 (including all categories of personnel)
 missing: 1,759 (including all categories of personnel)

2) flying units

dead: 76 (including all categories of personnel)
 missing: 236 (including all categories of personnel).

The difference (127) between the dead and missing of the flying units and the losses of the XI Air Corps should theoretically - represent the losses suffered by the VIII Air Corps.

In reality, however, the losses of the VIII Air Corps are listed as follows⁴²⁹:

428 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52.

429 - Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen, Diary, (o.cit.), page 55. It is not clear whether Generalfeldmarschall von Richthofen's figures refer to the campaign in the Balkans, including Crete, or to the operation on Crete alone.

dead: 172

missing: 141

total losses: 313

The only prisoners taken were seventeen German officers, who were brought to Egypt⁴³⁰.

The British figures on German losses are far too high. Churchill, for example, speaks of "more than 5,000 paratroopers killed"⁴³¹, and estimates the total German losses at 15,000 dead and wounded.

Generaloberst Student has the following to say in this connection⁴³²:
 "Our losses (both dead and wounded, amounted to 3,400 men; any figures higher than this are wrong!"

b. Materiel losses

During the air landing operation in Holland in 1940, 183 of Germany's valuable transport aircraft were lost⁴³³. According to reliable records

430 - D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 394. This is the only source which mentions these prisoners. (The author is personally acquainted with some of them - Major Altmann, for example).

431 - Winston Churchill, op.cit., page 302.

432 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 32, column II. These figures refer only to the XI Air Corps (parachute elements and flying units) and do not include the losses sustained by the 5th Mountain Infantry Division. The figures given on pages 211 and 212 of the present study are thus in agreement. Generaloberst Student has included the approximately 900 lightly wounded personnel in his figure for "wounded".

433 - See the author's study on the employment of air landing forces in the West, page 142.

of the Air Commander, XI Air Corps⁴³⁴, the losses on Crete were clearly sufficient to explain the enormous reduction in available transport space.

In the first place, all of the freight gliders which landed on the island were destroyed⁴³⁵.

An interim report (as of 25 April 1941⁴³⁶) indicates that by that time 201 Ju-52's had already been put out of action - 76 of them having been completely destroyed.

Of the 493 Ju-52's reported as fully operable on the first day of operations (20 May 1941), only 185 were still available for immediate employment by 31 May!

The losses in transport aircraft during the entire battle of Crete were as follows:

Completely destroyed:	143 Ju-52's
Missing in action:	8 Ju-52's
Seriously damaged:	120 Ju-52's.

It was clear that these extremely high losses were bound to jeopardize the pilot training program in the home area. After all, most of the replacement transport aircraft came from the pilot training schools. Factory production of the Ju-52

434 - General Conrad, Diary as edited by W. Hornung, entry dated 20 March 1955.

435 - General Conrad, Diary as edited by W. Hornung, page 22.

436 - General Conrad, Diary as edited by W. Hornung, pages 32 and 39. According to General Conrad, the operational readiness of the transport aircraft was as follows:

20 May 1941	-	493 Ju-52's
21 May 1941	-	443 Ju-52's
22 May 1941	-	322 Ju-52's (1)
23 May 1941	-	273 Ju-52's
24 May 1941	-	263 Ju-52's
25 May 1941	-	240 Ju-52's
31 May 1941	-	185 Ju-52's

would have required too much time and too much raw material; in addition, work on other models would have had to be relegated to the background. Supply operations in Africa and in Norway also suffered from the shortage of air transport space.

There are no data available concerning the aircraft losses sustained by the VIII Air Corps. It is said⁴³⁷ that the losses suffered by the dive-bomber units during the battle of Crete were "extremely low".

2. Enemy losses.

a. Personnel losses.

Based on the interrogation of prisoners of war, an evaluation of the strength and deployment of the enemy forces on Crete as of 20 May 1941 was set up. Prepared shortly after the conclusion of hostilities (on 11 June 1941), the evaluation agrees in the main with the data given in the "Official History of New Zealand - War History Branch"⁴³⁸, which in turn are based on authentic sources.

According to this evaluation, the following forces were present on Crete as of 20 May 1941⁴³⁹:

British Army	15,063
Royal Navy	2,366
Royal Air Force	618
Australian troops	6,540
New Zealand troops	7,702
Greek troops	<u>10,258</u>
total:	42,547

437 - General Hitschold, study prepared in 1954, page 12.

438 - D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 480 ff.

439 - D.M. Davin, op.cit., page 485, has the following to say regarding these figures: "Strength almost exactly accurate ..."

The available sources vary a great deal in their breakdown of enemy strength on Crete⁴⁴⁰, most of them listing a total of fewer than 30,000 troops. Any figures differing from the ones given above, however, must be viewed as inaccurate.

Of the total force employed, the British losses amounted to 1,751 dead and missing in action⁴⁴¹.

Admiral Cunningham indicates⁴⁴² that the Royal Navy lost more than 2,000 men during its operations "around Crete".

There is no information available concerning the losses sustained by the population of Crete or the Cretan guerrilla forces.

A total of 12,254 enemy personnel were taken prisoner on Crete⁴⁴³.

b. Materiel losses.

During the battle of Crete, the Royal Air Force sustained the following losses:

21 aircraft downed

12 aircraft destroyed on the ground⁴⁴⁴

136 artillery pieces captured

30 tanks captured.

The Royal Navy lost the following⁴⁴⁵:

440 - Most of the sources list only "British Army, Australian troops, and New Zealand troops" and then indicate an estimated total of 28,000 troops (15,000 plus 6,000 plus 7,000).

441 - Not 5,000, as is often indicated in the sources.

442 - Admiral Cunningham, A Sailor's Odyssey, page 389.

443 - The figures given by the Fourth Air Fleet are in full accord with those given by D.M. Davin.

444 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52.

445 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 51. Official British sources, as cited by W. Gaul, op.cit., page 31, list the following losses: 4 cruisers, 6 destroyers, 1 mine sweeper, 3 submarine chasers, 5 torpedo boats, and 19 landing barges. It is possible that these figures are based on a different system of classification.

217

sunk: 8 cruisers

10 destroyers

5 torpedo boats

1 submarine

damaged: 1 aircraft carrier

3 battle ships

3 cruisers

8 destroyers

1 special duty ship⁴⁴⁶.

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+

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The high losses in personnel and materiel sustained by the British gave the Axis Powers a slight edge in the Mediterranean, an advantage which they failed entirely to exploit.

446 - Based on the British figures cited by W. Gaul, op.cit., page 14.

CHAPTER XI

The Lessons of Experience⁴⁴⁷

Our concluding remarks on the air landing operation in Crete should be preceded by a brief comparison of intention and achievement.

The intention was to capture the island of Crete in order to utilize it as a kind of "aircraft carrier" from which to disrupt the British supply lines in the eastern Mediterranean (Suez!). Moreover, reinforcements and supplies for the African campaign were to be routed over Crete as an intermediate station⁴⁴⁸. Provided that Crete could be taken quickly and without high losses, it might well be used as a stepping-stone to further conquests in the Middle East - Cyprus, Suez, Syria, etc.⁴⁴⁹.

This generously-conceived plan for the destruction of the British position in the eastern Mediterranean⁴⁵⁰ resulted in a Pyrrhic Victory won at the price of high and bloody losses, a victory which brought the parachute and air landing forces into disfavor with the top-level Wehrmacht command agencies. "The time for successful employment of this type of force is past, it no longer has the advantage of surprise. We won't need air

447 - There are two sources which report in detail on the lessons to be learned from the experience gathered on Crete: 1) Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, Appendix, pages 45-51, and 2) Report of the Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch, B, File No. 1839/41, Classified (for command only), dated 2 October 1941. (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

448 - See the introduction to the present study.

449 - Liddel Hart, op.cit., page 295: "...Student told me, 'As soon as I had gained Hitler's approval for the Crete operation, I suggested taking Cyprus from the air and - using it as a base - occupying the Suez Canal. Hitler seemed to be rather in favor of the plan but didn't want to commit himself - his mind was already too occupied with the coming offensive against Soviet Russia. Later, shocked by the high losses suffered during the operations on Crete, he refused to consider any further air landing actions. It tried repeatedly to change his mind, but to no avail!'"

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450 - Winston Churchill, op.cit., page 302: "Goering could easily have captured Cyprus, Iraq, Syria, - even Persia with his air landing forces." This possibility was frustrated by the Pyrrhic victory on Crete.

landing troops any longer" - this was Hitler's decision⁴⁵¹. Possession of Crete could do little to support Rommel's advance in Africa⁴⁵². As the war progressed, this hard-won bastion in the eastern Mediterranean gradually sank into insignificance.

The success involved in the German occupation of Crete was reaped - indirectly - by the allies. "Later on the British and the Americans built up much stronger 'air landing divisions'", writes Churchill⁴⁵³.

With the help of the Allied air landing divisions, the invasion in Africa was a resounding success. The "armies transported by air" were listed on paper⁴⁵⁴ in Germany; in the Allied camp, they were where they were needed when they were needed.

451 - Liddel Hart, op.cit., page 294: "'The days of the paratrooper are over!'", said Hitler".

452 - General Warlimont: "It soon became clear that the German Luftwaffe did not have sufficient forces at its disposal to exploit the advantages offered by the island of Crete as the most important air outpost in the eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, it proved to be impossible to keep Rommel's armies supplied using Crete as a base, inasmuch as the rail facilities as far as Athens were barely adequate to guarantee the supply of the forces in Greece itself and there were hardly any ships available" (in Liddel Hart, op.cit., page 290).

453 - Winston Churchill, op.cit., page 301.

454 - As of May 1944 there was still one German parachute army - but with no transport aircraft to move it!

The chance of ultimate success which was created by the victory on Crete - with particular emphasis on the resultant weakening of the British naval position in the eastern Mediterranean - was simply not exploited. Also it proved to be impossible to defeat two strong enemies, England and Russia, at the same time. Hitler's "continent-bound" thinking and his horror of over-water operations⁴⁵⁵ won out in the plans developed at top level.

+ + +

Even so, the occupation of a naturally inaccessible island by troops transported by air did not fail to produce a certain tactical effect⁴⁵⁶. In England, for example, the fear of an airborne invasion tied down a considerably large force in home defense activities. It can also be assumed that the Soviet enemy had established a relatively strong reserve force to meet any surprise attacks from the "third dimension"⁴⁵⁷.

Borderline, still precariously neutral nations such as Turkey, for example, were sufficiently impressed by the German victory on Crete that they could not be persuaded to join the Allied camp⁴⁵⁸. And as far as Germany's naval forces were concerned, the high losses sustained by the British in the battle of Crete offered proof that not even the mightiest fleet can operate with impunity in an area dominated by a superior enemy air force⁴⁵⁹.

455 - Generaloberst Student, Memoirs, page 19.

456 - The effect here was a fairly indirect one.

457 - The vast geographical extent of Russia revealed clearly at that time (as today) the limitations to which any air landing operation launched far from the friendly front was subject. The German parachute and air landing forces set down in the sparsely-settled interior of Russia were soon surrounded by enemy armored units and completely destroyed. The only air landing actions which have any chance of success in Russia are those which are improvised on short notice - against enemy key positions, command headquarters, narrow water passageways, river fords, mountain passes, etc. - and which are carried out with concurrent attacks by friendly tanks and aircraft. (Meindl study).

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- 458 - Generaloberst Student, during the course of a public lecture at Hildesheim on 29 November 1953.
- 459 - On 27 May 1941, thus during the course of the battle for Crete, the modern German battleship "Bismarck", engaged in operations against Allied supply convoys without air escort, was severely damaged by British torpedo aircraft in the northern Atlantic and finally sunk by Allied warships summoned to the scene. Unfortunately there were no German aircraft carriers in the vicinity to come to her defense.
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Once the Russian campaign had gotten under way, the war in the Mediterranean was relegated to the background as a "secondary action". The imaginatively conceived targets to be attained using Crete as a base of operations were completely forgotten⁴⁶⁰.

The Lessons of Experience

Section 1

Within the realm of experience, the most conspicuous factor was the failure of the intelligence agencies to evaluate the situation of the enemy. Operations on Crete were adversely influenced by the erroneous data furnished concerning the strength and location of enemy forces⁴⁶¹. German intelligence did not have adequate or accurate information on the strength and fighting power of the British and Greek forces, their deployment throughout the island, or on the will to resistance on the part of the island population⁴⁶².

The XI Air Corps was responsible for aerial reconnaissance of enemy movements at the island's airfields, troop assembly points, and harbors; it was to locate possible enemy antiaircraft artillery emplacements, defensive fortifications, and encampments; and it was to be on the alert for any movement of enemy troops.

460 - Even the successful German attempt at intervention in Iraq (14 May through 1 July 1941) was doomed to ultimate failure. Following suit on 12 July 1941, Syria went over to the Allied camp, followed by Iran in August 1941.

461 - Report of the Headquarters, XI Air Corps, Operations Branch B, File No. 1839/41, Classified (for command only), dated 2 October 1941 (Karlsruhe Document Collection).

462 - Ibid., page 2: "During wartime uncertainty is usually the rule". The Fourth Air Fleet was responsible for gathering intelligence on the enemy situation, yet its reports make no reference whatsoever to the erroneousess of the evaluations issued. The XI Air Corps was charged with the accomplishment of the actual reconnaissance flights.

In all of these missions, its efforts were unsuccessful due to the extremely difficult terrain and the extraordinary talent of the enemy for effective camouflage⁴⁶³.

Section 2.

The behavior of the enemy was decisively influenced by a single important factor in the defense of the island - the Royal Air Force was not available during the first, highly significant operations at the beginning of the battle!

"If General Freyberg had been in a position to call upon the Royal Air Force ... to bombard the German forces at Malemes, he probably could have won back the territory already lost; but the communications system connecting Crete with RAF headquarters in Cairo was positively antediluvian..."⁴⁶⁴

The stubborn resistance offered by the British and their ruthless employment of all available naval forces made it clear that they intended to defend the island at all costs. British preparations for defense had been as thorough as possible under the circumstances⁴⁶⁵. Crete's defenders (soldiers from the British Isles, New Zealand, and Australia), in obedience to the marine tradition they had inherited, looked to the sea for the invasion they expected.

463 - Reconnaissance aircraft may well alert the enemy to what is going on and thus jeopardize military security. It is up to command to decide whether it would rather have security and the resultant possibility of surprising the enemy or an adequate picture of the enemy situation. As far as Operation MERKUR was concerned, the decision was entirely irrelevant (XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 3).

464 - General Fuller, op.cit., page 130.

465 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 45, paragraph 3. Ever since November 1940, the British had been busy preparing the defenses of the island (Expeditionary Corps sent to Greece under the command of General Wilson). Specifically, the British "... identified all the possible landing points along the northern coast and secured them against invasion by strongly-manned defensive positions." (XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 4).

Section 3.

As far as the invaders were concerned, the technological inadequacies of their assembly and take-off areas on the mainland had a decidedly detrimental effect on their accomplishment of Operation MERKUR. Improvisation had become a way of life for them. The invasion plan was frustrated by the necessity (determined by the lack of airfield space) of assembling the freight glider squadrons and the paratrooper squadrons at the same fields. As a result, the slower freight glider squadrons, which were supposed to land on the island as an advance force, did not arrive until after the paratroopers⁴⁶⁶.

In terms of the over-all success of the operation, the late and piecemeal arrival of Combat Group East with the second invasion wave was nearly fatal. The inadequacy of the take-off base and its ground organization did, to be sure, play a role, but it was not the only reason for the over-all ineffectiveness of this particular action.

In view of the difficult conditions (dust, fueling difficulties, etc.), the take-off of the second wave ought to have been postponed until the following day!

"No one was willing to take the responsibility for such a far-reaching decision."⁴⁶⁷

The XI Air Corps was not informed of these difficulties until much later, and then only inaccurately⁴⁶⁸. The VIII Air Corps was not informed at all.

466- XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 3.

467 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 4.

468 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 4.

This grave tactical error, together with the fact that the freight gliders and paratrooper units were sometimes landed as much as five miles away from their planned targets⁴⁶⁹, had serious and far-reaching consequences for the entire action on Crete. It was stated that "investigations were being conducted"⁴⁷⁰, but apart from the version already discussed, nothing further was ever heard about it⁴⁷¹.

The blame in any event must be placed on the operation's leaders, who obviously did not always cooperate in the "exemplary" fashion claimed⁴⁷².

A routine inquiry on the part of the VIII Air Corps as to whether everything was in order for the take-off of the second wave would have disclosed the difficulties immediately. Or the Fourth Air Fleet, as higher headquarters, ought to have taken a more active part, i.e. ought to have "led"! With the help of a single courier aircraft, the Fourth Air Fleet could have kept itself informed with no difficulty whatsoever...

Instead, a serious crisis for the entire operation was allowed to develop through the failure to occupy the airfield at Iraklion, the one best suited to serve as a base for the occupation of the island. As a result the original operational plans all had to be changed at the last minute. This situation

469 - "It was worst at Rethymnon..." XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, pages 4 and 5, paragraph 5. "The success or failure of a paratrooper landing lies exclusively in the hands of the jumpmaster." And some of those participating in Operation MERKUR showed serious gaps in their training.

470 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 4, paragraph 3.

471 - See page 134 of the present study.

472 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 52.

could have been avoided by timely and firm leadership. Technical defects such as a failure in the communications system at the decisive moment⁴⁷³, and human factors such as overwork and exhaustion on the part of responsible leaders are things which a thoughtful commander must foresee and prevent. In this particular case, the situation could have been saved. It seems pointless to try to single out any one individual to blame.

Section 4.

As one of the last lessons of experience, let us examine the principles of employment which were defined as follows after the conclusion of Operation MERKUR⁴⁷⁴:

"The landing of the first invasion wave of the XI Air Corps was carried out over the island's three airfields right into the midst of the enemy's strong antiaircraft defenses! The enemy artillery was supposed to have been neutralized by troops landed nearby by freight glider; at none of the three airfields was this the case.

The repetition of an air landing operation in this form can never be permitted. Any subsequent landings must be carried out in territory which is clear of enemy forces. In other words, if further air landings are to be undertaken, the landing area must be seized in offensive action."

General Student has the following comments to make on the principles outlined above⁴⁷⁵:

473 - Similar difficulties had to be overcome on the occasion of the bombardment of Rotterdam on 13 May 1940!

474 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 46, paragraph II,1.

475 - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, Part III, page 9.

"The paratrooper force is that force among our ground troops best capable of exploiting the factor of surprise. For this reason I deliberately emphasized from the very beginning the appropriateness of their employment in a coup de main (as the embodiment of total surprise), and ordered a corresponding method of commitment - a landing as close as possible to the target, permitting its capture in a sudden attack. In the face of stubborn resistance from above and opposition in my own ranks, I succeeded in obtaining approval for this new and daring method of operation. The overwhelming victories won by the paratroopers so far in Norway, Holland, Eben Emael, and Corinth have all been surprise victories based on these tactics. Crete would probably have followed the same pattern, if the difficulties discussed above had not intervened to jeopardize the entire operation."

In the case of Crete, of course, any coup de main would inevitably have cost heavy losses, since the most important factor - that of total surprise - was missing and the airfields were more strongly defended than had been anticipated. The other method of commitment (a landing out of the reach of enemy forces, assembly, and systematic advance towards the target) had been under serious consideration by the paratroop forces prior to their initial employment in the west. "This method was given particular consideration in connection with Crete"⁴⁷⁶.

It is very nearly impossible to set up a uniform principle of commitment for a paratrooper force. Before undertaking any mission, careful thought must be given to which method is likely to lead to the desired result more economically under the specific conditions obtaining. The coup de main-type of attack probably corresponds more closely to the nature of a paratrooper force, particularly if the invasion force is to be made up of smaller elements.

⁴⁷⁶ - XI Air Corps, Report on Crete, page 10.

If, on the other hand, the invasion force is of regiment or division strength, then a landing outside the sphere of enemy action, followed by assembly and systematic advance, may be the better plan.

The employment of Ju-52 aircraft in paratrooper and air landing operations proved entirely satisfactory⁴⁷⁷. The problem of transporting troops through the air offers a wide field of development for the aeronautical engineers⁴⁷⁸.

The utilization of the 5th Mountain Infantry Division as an air landing force proved to be great success⁴⁷⁹. Their weapons, including the heavier mountain artillery pieces, lent themselves well to air transport in every respect⁴⁸⁰. In future there would seem to be no need of maintaining a special force (such as Germany's 22d Infantry Division) to be used in air landing operations. On the contrary, it is far more desirable to be able to pick any force whose weapons can be transported by air (light infantry, for example) for such missions.

Section 5.

With the indispensable aid of the Luftwaffe, the battle with the British fleet was decided in Germany's favor⁴⁸¹. This serves as ample proof of the fact that an enemy naval force can be neutralized by air forces within a relatively limited area. It does, of course, require strong air units with

477 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 48, paragraph VII, 1.

478 - All sorts of possibilities already exist in theory and, in part, in practice - helicopters (for example the American one-man helicopter with rocket engines), aircraft capable of landing tanks, and even large-capacity jet transports.

479 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 47, paragraph VI.

480 - The difficulty, of course, was in moving the larger artillery pieces once they had been landed and in replenishing the supply of ammunition.

481 - Fourth Air Fleet, Report on Crete, page 50, paragraph XIII.

special training in combatting ships.

Air attacks on the enemy ships were carried out with such uninterrupted ruthlessness that ship-based antiaircraft artillery, strong and highly effective to begin with, gradually subsided. Soon afterwards, the ship-based artillery was forced to a complete stop since it had run out of ammunition. At this point the VIII Air Corps intensified its attacks and since these were entirely unopposed, they were doubly effective⁴⁸². The British aircraft carriers did not dare to come too close to the Luftwaffe's sphere of action.

Only the most important of the many lessons of experience taught by Operation MERKUR have been dealt with here. Other aspects, among them the formation of an effective point of main effort, the establishment of an adequate source of supplies, the maintenance of military security, the setting up of smoothly functioning supply lines, the improvement of signal communications⁴⁸³, the question of training⁴⁸⁴, the commitment of freight gliders, the selection of weapons and equipment, the employment of tanks and heavy weapons, the question of providing appropriate clothing, food, etc., have been mentioned briefly either in the text itself or in the footnotes.

The prerequisites for a successful air landing operation have been discussed in detail elsewhere⁴⁸⁵. They were based primarily on the experience gained during Germany's two large-scale air landing actions in World War II - Holland and Crete.

482 - W. Churchill, op.cit., page 278 ff. "The hated air attacks lasted from six in the morning until three in the afternoon, and continued until the ships were within 100 miles of Alexandria..."

483 - Particularly as regards communication between the ground forces and the flying units.

484 - We might point out that it ought to be easier to train an expert infantry man to be a paratrooper than to train a paratrooper to be an all-around infantryman.

485 - See the author's study on the airlanding operation in Holland, pages 146-49.

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The excellent coordination of Luftwaffe, Army and Navy operations - of paratroopers, flying units, mountain infantry troops, and sea-going personnel - created the premises for an overwhelming victory by the newly-conceived air landing force, and this in the face of the worst possible climatic and topographical conditions.